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DSi
NINTENDO REVAMPS ITS HANDHELD VISION



DEAD SPACE



SONIC CHRONICLES



DEUS EX 3
THE RETURN OF THE THINKING MAN'S FPS



WipEout HD

LittleBIGPlanet





ROCKBAND 2

FARCRY 2



MEGAMAN 9



BAJA
EDGE OF CONTROL





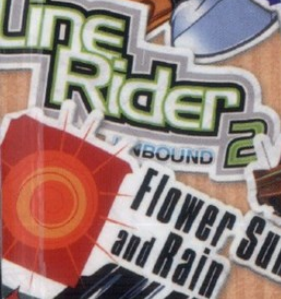
REVIEWS SPECIAL
22 GAMES TESTED – STARTING WITH THE WORLD-CHANGING LITTLEBIGPLANET



BATMAN
THE VIDEOGAME



DISGAEA
Absence of Justice



Line Rider 2
UNBOUND

Flower Sun and Rain



BULLET HELL
INSIDE JAPAN'S SHOOTER REVIVAL





Tales of Vesperia

Saints Row

FABLE II



MOTORSTORM PACIFIC RIFT

MIDNIGHT CLUB LOS ANGELES



3D GENERATIONS
A HISTORY OF VIDEOGAME GRAPHICS



LEGENDARY

WORLD OF GOO





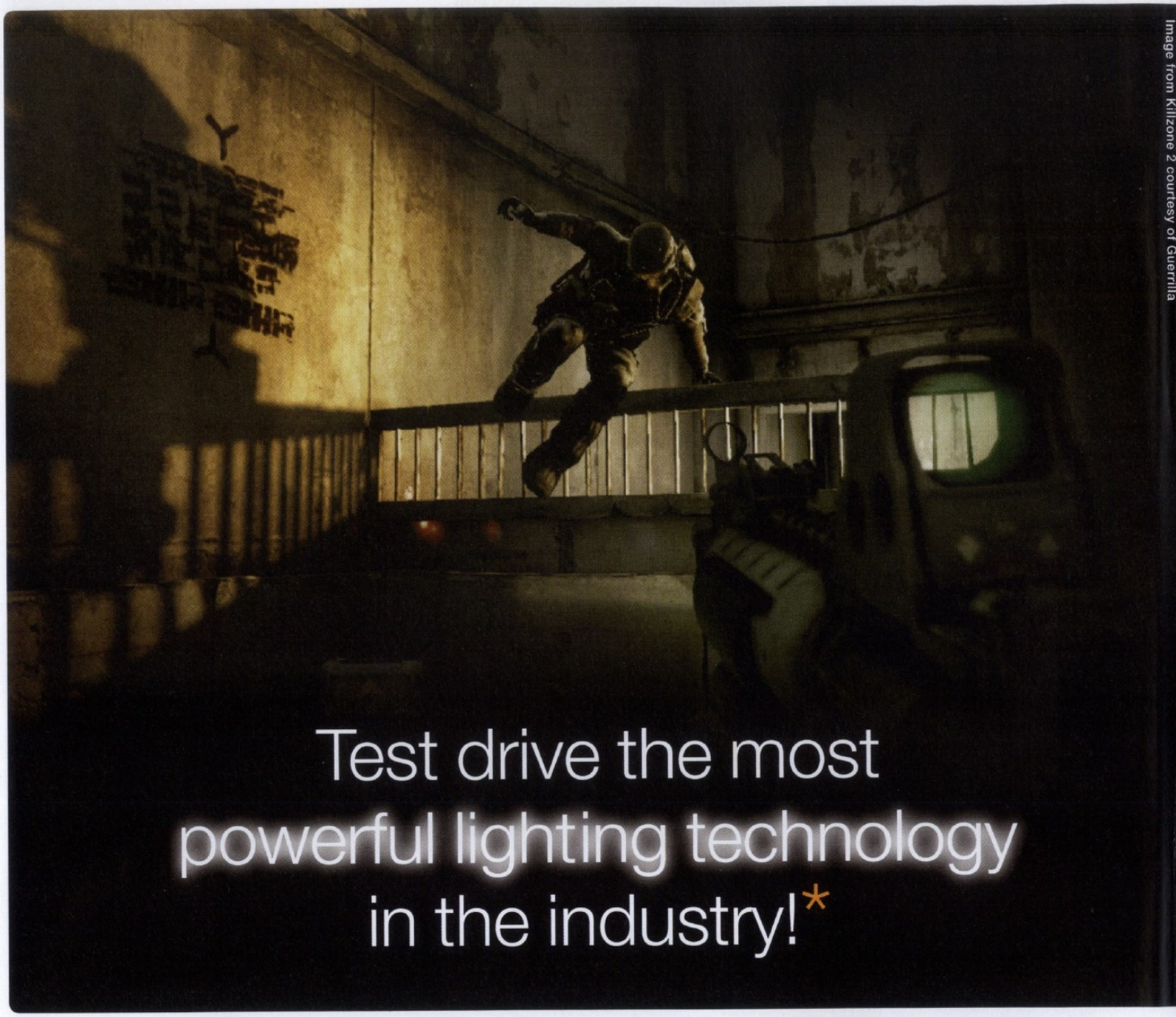
There comes a time in many hobbyists' lives when thoughts turn from consumption to creation. The Tolkien obsessive decides that it is time for his own heroes' tales to be told. The D&D fanatic puts aside his TSR modules and sets about mapping out his own. And the videogame addict learns how to program his computer, moving from a standing start to published game author within the space of a few short, intense months. Or at least that's how it was for many game creators during what is often termed the golden era of home computing, when consumer expectations were low and games were published on C15 cassettes delivered in shatter-happy plastic cases inlaid with photocopied illustrations of men with swords who bore no resemblance to anything that would actually make an appearance during the action you'd acquired by sending a £7.99 postal order to an address in Dorset.

Those who successfully made the leap from gamer to game-maker knew only too well that there were others out there who shared their passions but not necessarily their skillsets, and the result was a proliferation of products with creation at their core. Gilsoft's The Quill provided budding adventure game authors with a package dedicated to writing examples of the genre from the ground up. Other releases, such as Sensible's Shoot 'Em Up Construction Kit and EA's Pinball Construction Set, were more like remixing tools. But whatever their complexity, all of these things shared a common goal: unleashing the potential of those whose imaginations always wandered beyond the last level.

Nowadays, of course, the likes of Epic and Crytek package editors with their games, and the PC mod scene that has grown around such initiatives remains one of the most dynamic communities within all of gaming. Are these dense, multi-layered applications for everyone, though?

No. Not like *LittleBigPlanet*, our lead review this issue (see page 76). It may be simpler to use than the tools beloved of the mod community, but in many ways it is a much more complex beast. It is certainly cleverer. Now, we want to see what you can make with it. Point us in the direction of your creations via the usual address.





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Future Publishing, 30 Monmouth Street, Bath, BA1 2BW
Telephone: +44 (0)1225 442244
Fax: +44 (0)1225 732275
Email: edge@futurenet.com
Edge website: www.edge-online.com

PEOPLE ON EDGE
Tony Mott editor-in-chief
Alex Wiltshire deputy editor
Ian Evenden production editor
Martin Davies writer
Richard Stanton writer
Christophe Kagotani Tokyo bureau
Darren Phillips art editor
Andrew Hind deputy art editor
Colin Campbell online editor

CONTRIBUTORS
Koji Aizawa, Brandon Boyer, Nick Burton, Matthew Castle, Mike Channell, N'Gai Croal, Christian Donlan, John Gaudiosi, Jon Jordan, Duncan Harris, Sally Henderson, Owen Hill, Leon Hurley, Gary Lucken, Steven Poole, Andrew Shankland, Andy Short, Randy Smith, Terry Stokes, Alvin Weetman

Ian Miller group art director
Robin Abbott creative director
Matthew Williams design director
Jim Douglas editorial director

ADVERTISING
Julian House advertising manager
Ryan Ferguson account director
Clare Dove UK sales director
Advertising phone 01225 442244

MARKETING
Tom Acton marketing campaign manager
Matt Woods brand marketing director

CIRCULATION
Russell Hughes trade marketing manager
Duncan Shearer group circulation manager
Chris Spratling circulation & trade marketing director
John Lawton international account manager
(john.lawton@futurenet.com)

PRINT & PRODUCTION
Stephanie Smith production co-ordinator
Rose Griffiths production manager
Richard Mason head of production
Colin Polis Future Plus buyer

LICENSING
Tim Hudson head of international licensing

FUTURE PUBLISHING LIMITED
James Binns publishing director
Simon Wear chief operating officer
Robert Price chief executive

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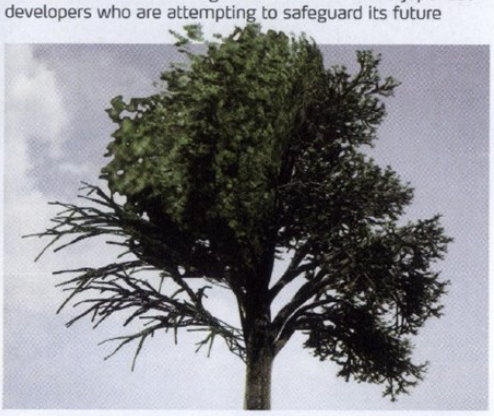
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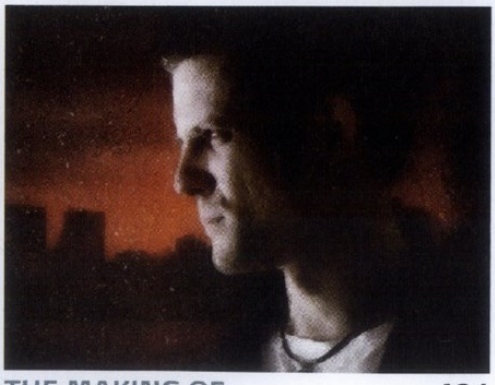
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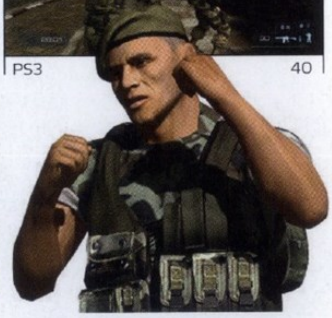
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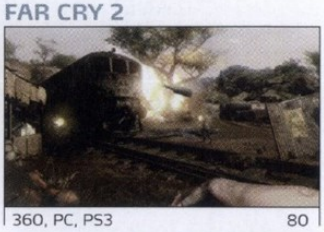
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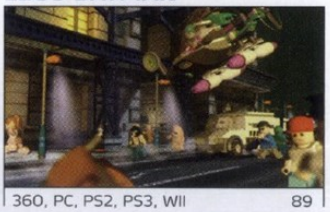
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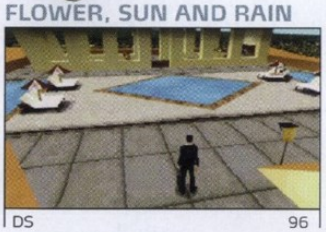
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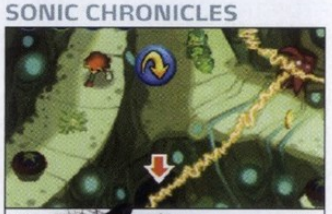
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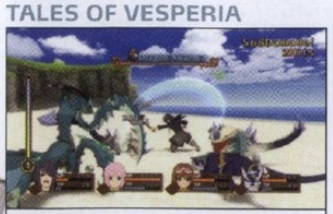
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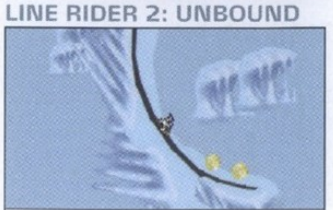
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編集
カメラ
録音
消しゴム
ペン
塗る
保存
START
SELECT
POWER
X
Y
A
B
START



HARDWARE

Happy hardcore?

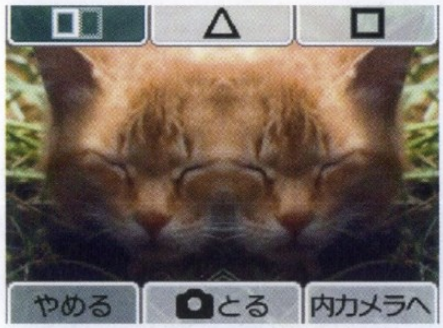
Nintendo's annual conference reveals a new DS and a slew of titles. Did it meet expectations?

On October 2, Nintendo announced its latest iteration of the DS family, DSi, at a conference that attempted to show a more robust line-up of games than was evident at E3, following criticism of Nintendo's attitude toward its traditional audience. But despite generating a good deal of excitement with talk of a new *Punch-Out!!* and *Sin And Punishment*, the main act – the unveiling of the new hardware – left some slightly underwhelmed. Those who were anticipating the announcement had envisioned a more substantial update, with an enhanced graphics processor, but DSi is no DS2. In making the leap from DS Lite to DSi, Nintendo is introducing a smattering of features that, at surface value, appear to do little to compete with those of current mobile phone devices.

Simultaneously lighter, thinner and yet larger than the previous incarnation, DSi expands the sizes of the screens while keeping them at the same resolution. This, combined with an improved audio processor, eats a chunk from the unit's battery life. The GBA port has been axed, replaced by an SD card slot for storage, bolstering Nintendo's move towards digital distribution through the DSiWare store, accessible through the handheld's new browser. The biggest buzz surrounds the cameras and improved audio – but with only 0.3 megapixels to play with, DSi is underpowered compared to most modern phones. Even Nintendo CEO Satoru Iwata (pictured left) said that the cameras and AAC music playback would be unlikely selling points on their own – instead suggesting that it would be the software support for these facilities that would make DSi an attractive upgrade. These include editing tools entitled DSi Sound and DSi Camera, the latter allowing users to draw on and manipulate photos moments after taking them, and Ugoku Memocho, 'the animated memo', which allows users to create their own short animations, either by drawing or using the camera, and share them with friends.

DSi marks Nintendo's continuing strategy in the online multimedia space, while continuing the company's tradition of making widely affordable products







Although DSi's 0.3 megapixel cameras won't shake up the digital photography market, it suggests that Nintendo does not intend the handheld to be considered an all-in-one convergent device, instead being geared towards playful uses, like warping your friends' faces

While tech-hungry consumers may have been momentarily disappointed by the modesty of the updated handheld, Nintendo has no urgent need to release a new hardware platform. Looking at past form, GBA also received three iterations before being sidelined in favour of new technology. Speaking anonymously, Nintendo representatives drew parallels between the current crop of consoles and the marketplace at the time of the Famicom, saying that "the time for the Super Famicom has not come yet." But market forces aren't the only consideration. DSi marks Nintendo's continuing strategy in the online multimedia space, while continuing the company's tradition of making widely affordable products; the technology for DS2 is believed to already exist, but reducing the manufacturing cost of a high-end DS is another matter. To put that in perspective: at ¥18,900 (£105), DSi clocks in at only a fraction more than the ¥16,800 (£95) DS Lite.

Nor does DSi compromise the support of those thirdparty developers still happy to continue making games for a platform that has not yet reached its installed-base peak worldwide.

"The developer side of me, the businessman side of me, really wasn't looking for DS2 at this point in time," says **Pete Shea**, creative director at *Trackmania DS* studio Firebrand Games. "The DS is still selling well, and hasn't reached saturation –



The Wii Speak microphone will be released with a new Japan-only conferencing Wii Channel, and is packaged with *Animal Crossing: City Folk*. Its ability to deal with ambient noise is a key strength





Yuji Naka, head of Prope, revealed *Let's Tap*. The game, due in December in Japan, has players propel avatars through an abstract steeplechase by drumming with their fingers





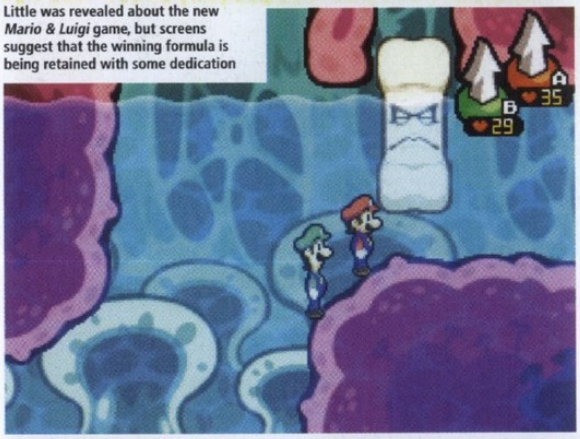
Nintendo has been pushing *Wii Music*'s kid-friendly credentials, even securing links with infant schools in Japan

except maybe in Japan. And we're only just starting to get that huge installed base now that we want as developers. So in that respect I'm relieved that the announcement wasn't DS2, because we would have been under pressure to move to that."

Shea outlines the difficulty a DS2 would have posed for developers: "You either go out and make DS2 games from day one and wait for the installed base to build up over a few years or do some sort of twin SKU where your game works on either." DSi, meanwhile, is backwards compatible. "Anything you do want to make use of – the camera, for instance – needs to be an optional thing," argues Shea. "I don't see anyone going near DSi-only games, apart from maybe Nintendo themselves, at least for a year or two."



Little was revealed about the new *Mario & Luigi* game, but screens suggest that the winning formula is being retained with some dedication



Beyond DSi's video and audio tools, however, the conference gave little insight into the way Nintendo will exploit the features of the new handheld. With the exception of *Mario & Luigi RPG 3* (announced for release next year), firstparty DS titles seemed to focus on niche gaming markets, such as the burgeoning teen girl demographic served by games like *Wagamama Fashion Girls Mode*. It was largely thirdparties who spoke to DS's more committed audience, with one of the most anticipated releases in Japan, Square Enix's *Dragon Quest IX*, now slated for release on the handheld next March. With media and retailers alike predicting that the title will sell more than four million copies – a record for the series in Japan – DS is set to gain a reputation for its range of RPGs, with original titles also appearing, such as Sega's spring release, *7th Dragon*.

After coaxing audience members to join him on stage, Shugeru Miyamoto presented *Wii Music*'s editing tool, allowing users to make their own album with a personalised cover and share it with friends.

While DSi dominated the conference, Iwata didn't forget Wii, discussing a solution to the console's storage issue in the form of SD memory-card support, and giving way to a demonstration of *Wii Music* by Shigeru Miyamoto. After coaxing several audience members to join him on stage in a live session, Miyamoto presented the game's editing tool, allowing users to make their own album with a personalised cover and share it with friends. He also demonstrated the drum lesson mode and some of the more unusual instrument noises that could be assigned, including barks, mewls, rapping and warbling gibberish.

More information was available on the forthcoming Wii version of *Animal Crossing*, which will be available in a package with the Wii Speak microphone, encouraging players to communicate with each other. Similar functions are being rolled out for Wii in general, with the release of the Wii Speak Channel concurrent with *Animal Crossing: City Folk* – although in the first instance this will be limited to Japan. But Miyamoto was keen to impress that *Animal Crossing* is far from the only effort the company is making to reconcile itself with a core audience. Under the name of Wii De Asobu Selection, or 'Play it on the Wii', Nintendo is planning to bring seven titles from GameCube to Wii, with suitably redesigned control schemes,





Dual Wii and DS release *Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles: Echoes Of Time* is a sequel to *Rings Of Fate* and features very similar action. Both Wii and DS versions of the game support Miis and are compatible in online multiplayer



7th Dragon, helmed by *Etrian Odyssey*'s Kazuya Niinou, is one of a number of forthcoming DS RPGs





Animal Crossing: Wild World (above) was joined by a new instalment in the *Klonoa* series (below) and Grezzo's *Line Attack Heroes* (bottom) on Wii



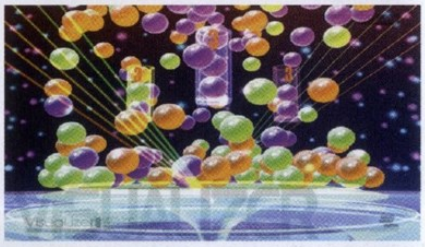




Hit of the show? For us, the sequel to *Punch-Out!!*, which sees the welcome comeback of King Hippo

"I have been making videogames for 25 years now, and I've finally managed to make one that doesn't need a controller," said **Yuji Naka** about *Let's Tap* (below). Its visuals have been likened to the games of Tetsuya Mizuguchi but it feels more like a cross between *Sonic The Hedgehog* and *Track & Field*









If they are demonstrable of actual in-game footage, then the screenshots released for *Monster Hunter 3* appear to push the bar for Wii graphics considerably higher (above left). Meanwhile, Cing's 2005 mystery game, *Trace Memory* (above right), makes the surprise leap from Nintendo's handheld to home console

each retailing at ¥3,800 (£21). The first of these will be *Donkey Kong Jungle Beat* and *Pikmin* in December, later to be followed by *Chibi-Robo*, *Pikmin 2*, *Mario Tennis*, *Metroid Prime* and *Metroid Prime 2: Echoes*. Similarly, some DS titles, like *Trace Memory*, will make their way to the home console.

A video detailing Wii's forthcoming line-up and the announcements of a remake for the much-loved *Punch-Out!!* and a sequel to Treasure's *Sin And Punishment* convinced many in attendance that Nintendo is directly combating criticism of Wii as a platform underpopulated with content aimed at hardcore gamers. Support for hobbyist users was similarly robust from thirdparty publishers, with many franchises making the transition to the console from PS2. Koei announced a sequel to *Sengoku Musou* for Wii, while BNG also confirmed that its next game in the *Tales Of...* series would appear on the console. Square Enix and Capcom vied to be star of the day, however, the latter revealing more of the hugely anticipated *Monster Hunter 3*, due in 2009, and the former introducing *Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles: Echoes Of Time*, which will be released for both Wii and DS in January, and will allow players of both consoles to share the same online play experience.

But it was former head of Sonic Team Yuji Naka who delivered one of the biggest surprises of the day, with the announcement of *Let's Tap*. Due on Wii in Japan this December, the game uses vibration as a means of control. Placing the Remote on a flat surface, the player taps next to it, the manner of the drumming determining whether the character runs or jumps as he navigates a Sonic-style obstacle course. Elsewhere, innovation with the Wii Remote generated more mixed responses: playing *Wii Sports Resort* without the MotionPlus extension attached produced some distinctly sub-par results.

While it was unusual to see a company as resolute as Nintendo react to criticism at all, the company's showing here was well-measured in an attempt to answer its detractors. If it is making small steps with hardware then it's part of a strategy to ensure that the revolution it has sparked with Wii and DS isn't seen as a fad – instead, the increased connectivity of the two machines, thanks to the DSi hardware's built-in browser, could well be seen as a move of consolidation rather than advancement, bringing the two platforms together in a symbiotic manner reminiscent of Apple's iTunes and iPod. Nintendo is certainly thinking of the future, too, but it may be some time before the Touch Generation sees its own Super Famicom age.

Newswire

STEAM™

Mod lifestyle

Is there anything Valve can't, or won't, do? In the last month it's announced that user-created mods for the Source engine will now be supported on Steam, providing the user has a Source game installed. They'll receive automatic updates like any other Steam game, and be fully integrated with the Steamworks tools that offer stat tracking and the like. It was announced with a bang with a free pack of five mods (*Age Of Chivalry*, *D.I.P.R.I.P.*, *Insurgency*, *Synergy* and *Zombie Panic*). Of course, we shouldn't be surprised: Valve regularly holds events celebrating and supporting the mod community. Our benefactors, we salute you.

SOUND BYTES

"Though this price may seem unfairly high, you need to figure in VAT tax, Suggested Retail Price, shipping costs... You're not being gouged."
Harmonix's description for *Rock Band 2*'s in-game item 'UK Bandana', which retails for a cheeky $366

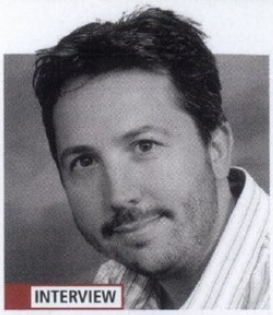
"The co-publisher/distributor for the game in Japan, Interchannel, will deal with the situation. In the meantime, we're thrilled that this bout of paranoia has brought so much attention to our first lovechild with Renegade Kid."
Gamecock's **Mike Wilson** reacts in his own inimitable style to calls by the Japanese Psychiatric Association to pull *Dementium: The Ward* from shops

"Superman was rough but I say what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. It made my liver stronger for sure."
Tiberium's cancellation inspires a lot of tales about working at EA's LA studio, including this one focused on the making of *Superman Returns*

"If you on *Call Of Duty* tonight and you see Lord 187X comin' through a building, nigga with the P90 with the silencer on, nigga you dead. You're dead. It happens so fast. And you watch me, I'm prestiged up, I got the ill emblems and everything, you know. All you pussies that wanna hit the prestige button: eat a dick. I'm a beast!"
Ice-T lays down the gauntlet to Xbox Live

"EA couldn't have done it, what the hell would EA know about it? They know nothing about launching MMOs in Europe, unless it's spending lots of money closing them down, I suppose."
Perhaps not the ideal way, **Paul Barnett**, to be talking about your co-publisher, just as *Warhammer Online* is finally being released

"Peter Molyneux's games have sold in excess of 15 million copies worldwide. In comparison, Madonna's Immaculate Collection album has sold 11 million copies worldwide."
Microsoft thinks outside of the box with Molyneux's credentials in a *Fable II* press release. But does he have a pointy bra?



INTERVIEW

Fenix rising

Scriptwriter Stuart Beattie explains why films based on games will dominate Hollywood in ten years



Having already turned 40-year-old Disneyland theme park ride Pirates Of The Caribbean into a cinematic blockbuster, Hollywood screenwriter **Stuart Beattie** (above) now has his sights set on doing the same thing with videogames. He penned the script for the upcoming adaptation of *Gears Of War*, and also completed a new Halo movie script during last year's Hollywood writers' strike. We spoke to him about the future of films based on videogames and his apparently leading role in it.

How do you think Hollywood's acceptance of games has evolved over the years?
I really don't think Hollywood's fully accepted videogames as source material yet, simply because there hasn't been a true bona-fide hit based on a videogame. I think it's still something people will dabble with until there's that first huge hit. And then there will be the rush of new games to the big screen just as we're seeing now with comic books.

So, despite games selling millions of units, it's still difficult to get green-lights for them?
Hollywood's a numbers business, so we're just waiting for the big game hit to open up the wave. For those of us who know how great games are for source material in Hollywood, we're all scrambling to try to make that big game movie.

Why do you think so many game adaptations have failed?
Because they've been made by people who don't play games or don't know them or don't even like games. Videogames are too new for many in Hollywood to grasp. In Hollywood, the people in charge of green-lighting films don't play videogames. They're not of that generation.

What do you think will happen as the gaming generation gets older?
As our generation moves up Hollywood's corporate ladder, hopefully that's when you'll see a lot more of these movies get made and made very well. Within ten years it'll be all videogame movies, just like you're seeing the flood of comic book movies now. The comic book movies are all based on people who grew up with them in the '80s. They get the spirit and essence of them and they adapt them faithfully. That's not the case right now with videogames.

What are videogame movie producers doing wrong?
They don't understand what makes the game great and they don't know how to translate that. Also, not every game should be a film – you have to know what's going to make a great cinematic experience versus a great gaming experience. A lot of videogame movies try to













Beattie says of the first *Pirates Of The Caribbean* game: "I got very bored. I don't like open-ended games." He also worked on a *Spy Hunter* script with The Rock, but it was canned: "I delivered it the same weekend as Universal released Doom, so it was bad timing"



adapt the game, and you can't nine times out of ten because they're designed inherently differently. You have to find the great story in the game and that's hard – not every game has that story. Pirates Of The Caribbean had its challenges, but in a way it was easier than a game in the sense that there was no story. It was just a series of images, so I was free to create my own story and my own characters and just put bits of the ride in.

What is it about *Gears Of War* that makes it ripe for cinema?

Gears has a great world with a great look and feel to it. It has great characters with great backstories. They're not faceless heroes. But you can't take the *Gears* game and break Marcus out of jail and kick Locust butt. That'll be fun for five minutes and fans of the game will be: "Yeah!" But after ten minutes they'll be: "I've played this movie before and I know how it's going to end." And people who haven't played the game will be asking: "Who is this guy? Are they on Earth? Who are the Locust?"

How did the project begin?

I got a message on Xbox Live one night from an executive at New Line who saw I was playing *Gears*. He asked if I'd adapt it if they bought the licence. Once I got the job I went to Epic and spent the weekend with them basking in the world. They thought it was cool that fans were going to see everything that leads up to the first game. The important part was getting them to trust me, and a lot of that was them knowing what a big fan of the game I was. There was one point where I mentioned something that was in the game and they told me I was wrong and I said to go check and it turned out I was right. There were points where I knew the game better than they did. They felt the movie was in good hands, and I knew the story inside and out.

"I got a message on Xbox Live one night from an executive at New Line who saw I was playing Gears. He asked if I'd adapt it if they bought the licence"

How does the gaming bible that most big titles have today help you as a scriptwriter?

It's extremely useful because it helps teach you about all of the things the creators have thought about. But I don't think any movie of a videogame can ever be considered canon. It's too different a medium. A graphic novel or book can, but movies cost so much money that there's a limit to what you can do. The people who create the IP can't control the movie like they can a book or comic.

Many videogames are clearly influenced by Hollywood films...

Halo is a perfect example because it's inspired by Aliens. It's cool because Aliens was 1986. There's a whole generation of kids who don't know Aliens, but they know *Halo*. It wouldn't work if the movie was recent. The Kryll in *Gears* is a good example of that. They were too much like the creatures in Pitch Black, so we're not using them in the first film – but maybe in the second.

Epic projection

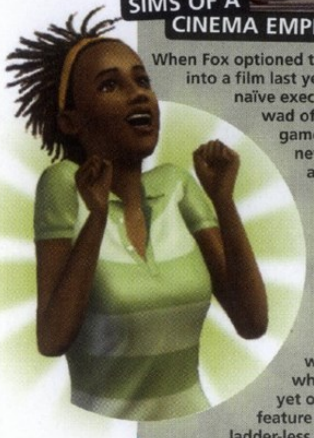
Beattie outlines his vision for the Gears Of War film

"To me, the whole game was this great backstory. You have a great, decorated soldier who fought gallantly in the Pendulum Wars and he's been fighting the Locust since Emergence Day. He disobeyed orders to rescue his father, who died, and he's sent to jail. So you can start the movie during the Pendulum Wars, which is essentially humans fighting humans over oil. That's something that audiences get. And then there's peace, so you have time to get to know these characters for, like, 20 minutes before Emergence Day happens. You start to care about them so you're with them on the ride. And if Fenix rescues his dad at the end of the movie and abandons his post to do that, he has to hate his father at the beginning. So there's the story arc – it becomes Marcus and his dad, Adam, coming closer. And by stepping back before the game, you're there with Marcus when he faces his first Locust Drone. Then the characters are just as scared as the audience and we're sharing the same experience. *Gears* has the opportunity to do all of that."

OUT THERE



SIMS OF A CINEMA EMPIRE



When Fox optioned the rights to make *The Sims* into a film last year, we assumed some game-naïve exec had simply slapped down a wad of cash before realising the game lacked a plot. It would never get made, surely? But, according to producer John Davis, plans to make an adventure movie out of the franchise continue to be bounced around Fox's boardrooms. Sounding like a cross between Jumanji and Weird Science, Davis describes a plot involving a magical version of *The Sims* which affects the real world when played. There's no news yet on whether the film will feature self-soiling protagonists or ladder-less swimming pool deathtraps.

● tinyurl.com/3p8pnt



INTERVIEW



Funny business

Gamecock's CEO has a reputation for wilful silliness, but how is it influencing its games?

Mike Wilson (above) recently stood for president of the ESA, even though the appointment wasn't actually open to a vote, and gave his mission statement while urinating behind a gravestone. Is this the kind of behaviour you expect from the chief executive of a publishing company? Wilson says it most certainly should be. We caught up with Gamecock's founder to ask him if and when his behaviour will be overshadowed by a line-up of great games.



When people visit Gamecock, they come back with tales of human wheelbarrow races and large numbers of bruises.
These happen a lot at our events. I don't know why or how. At our launch party in San Francisco our two investors had a billionaire-on-billionaire wheelbarrow race. I barely knew these guys back then. I was the wheelbarrow with the one guy and the other main investor was the wheelbarrow on the other team. The whistle went off and I was like, "I'm kicking his ass!" Then I looked back and saw that he was being pushed across the floor on his face. It was fantastic. He's probably training for next year. He'll have wheels built into his head.

How did your presidential bid work out?
There will be a very interesting film about it online soon. It was a tough race in LA, especially since my competitor refused to acknowledge that there was an election, or even a job opening. Stay tuned – it's not over yet!

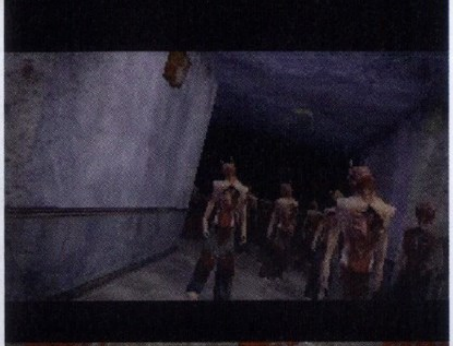
Is there a risk you're getting known for your antics rather than your games?
Maybe we are right now – because, well, over [in Europe] we haven't shipped much of anything yet. In the United States we've shipped a few small games. I think this autumn we're going to turn the corner and start releasing our big games and then through the next year. And then – and this is the whole point of Gamecock with its stupid name – our name shouldn't even matter. It should be about the developers and the games they make. It's been pretty hard getting to that. In America, people have a pretty negative opinion of us, and it's largely because they've heard so much about us and they're like, "Where are the fucking games?" Well, I don't know if you know this, but it takes a while to make a good game! I think people will understand. It's much funnier being called Gamecock when you have some really good shit, right?

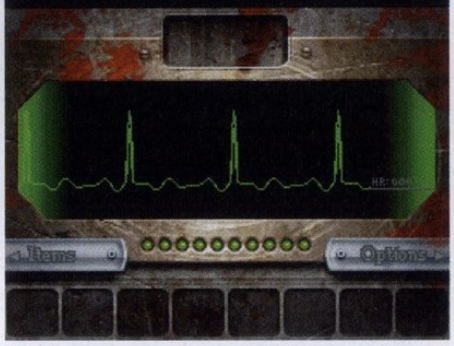




Promising miniaturised B-movie platformer *Mushroom Men* is due for release this autumn. Though he says he doesn't like to pick favourites among Gamecock's line-up of titles, Wilson clearly has high hopes for it, saying it will stand out against Wii's deluge of 'casual' shovelware







Velvet Assassin (main and below), the WWII stealth game based on the tragic life of British secret agent Violette Szabo, is one of the first really substantial releases from Gamecock. Such a sombre premise sits a little weirdly with the company's outlandish profile





"*Dementium* [left and below] is a great example of what Gamecock is about," says Wilson. "A few guys walk into our office with a working demo of a shooter on DS and we're just like: 'Don't go anywhere else, we'll do a deal this week'. And we did. And we're definitely going to work with that team again." He hopes that *Hail To The Chimp* (bottom row) will pick up a more even response in Europe than it did in the US, saying that an adverse political perception of America in other territories might help sales of a game that pokes fun at the region





Have you been pleased with the critical reception of the smaller games you've shipped so far?

Dementium did well for us – it still averages seven-and-a-half out of ten; a game done by three guys in six months. And the other game, *Hail To The Chimp*, got wildly varying reviews in the States. Literally, it's been nines to ones – a one really fucks up a Metacritic score. It was hovering between seven and eight before that. But it's a game we're proud of, and the guys who made it are proud of it. That's kind of the unifying factor of the games that we do – every one is made by a team who just wants to be making that game. They own the IP. Not every game will be a hit or critical success, but I think we'll have a pretty consistent level of quality simply because the guys are so stoked about their games. And it makes doing business a lot more fun. And 'fun' isn't in your conventional publisher-developer relationship these days.

We were recently discussing your slanging match with John Romero, or rather how unusual that kind of thing is now. Do you think the animosity has gone out of the industry along with the fun?

So many people are inside companies where they can't speak. It's ridiculous. But I hope that will change – I think that downloadable games will be fantastic for bringing creativity back into the industry. They'll issue this whole new crop of rising stars to replace your Will Wright, Peter Molyneux and Ken Levine, who have all been absorbed. Well, maybe not Peter Molyneux. Not quite.

So, are the days of the rockstar playboy game developer finished?

The industry's being run by a different class of people now. It's golfers, not gamers, running the show. It's easy for these guys to tell themselves that it doesn't matter and to do their jobs without ever playing a game – they do it, in fact – but it definitely changes the culture and the vibe of the industry. You could say it's working but actually these companies are losing their asses all the time

"The industry's being run by a different class of people now. It's golfers, not gamers, running the show. They can do their jobs without ever playing a game"

and laying off loads of people. Even the biggest ones are choking and gasping every time there's a dip in the market. At Gathering Of Developers our crusade was to shift the balance of power in the industry towards the creators – with Gamecock it's more that we're accepting the model isn't going to change just because we say so, but that doesn't mean we have to leave. It's a bit like being an American right now, to be honest. After the last election I wanted to move. It was embarrassing to be an American after we elected Bush twice. But do you abandon it or try to make it better? Well, that all happened at the same time as I was having a dilemma about the industry – it was so serious, so run by Wall Street. But I'm back in the industry and having fun and living in the only town in Texas where Bush never won anything.



WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

The man stares glassily at the screen in front of him. Jaw open, brow furrowing, one explanation. "There's Rainbow with his game face on!" the shrill American voiceover tells us, bringing the world of Korean pro-gaming to your computers. Complete with a dramatic, swooshy introductory sequence, GOMTV interviews the gamers, has live broadcasts and, most importantly, archived videos of the big matches on *StarCraft*. The brilliant strategies, utter focus and slight craziness of the players are the main attraction, but having their gameplans translated makes it one-more-go watchable. You could become an expert – and if not, where else would you hear "whoooa, the pandabear guy's on this map" anyway?

Site:
GOMTV
URL:
www.gomtv.net



EVENT

History toys

From ColecoVision to cosplayers, the UK is to receive its first videogame archive

Nottingham Trent University and the National Media Museum in Bradford have joined up to create the UK's first videogame archive. To be housed at the National Media Museum, the National Videogames Archive will comprise a broad range of artefacts to address both games themselves and their wider culture.

"The industry isn't doing much to archive its own products, such as instruction books, final retail releases and so on," says **James Newman** from Nottingham Trent University's Centre for Contemporary Play. "There's nothing that's doing to games what the BFI is doing for film."

To take on the wide remit of the archive – which, despite its name, will not be restricted to games associated with the UK – Newman and GameCity videogame festival director Iain Simons have begun a process of public consultation to establish a collections policy. Alongside consoles, discs and cartridges spanning the full history of the medium will be such material as advertising campaigns, fan art, songs, videos of speedruns and photographs of cosplayers.

"The challenge is finding ways of interpreting games for audiences – scholars as well as public," says Newman. "How can you make a 150-hour game accessible? Nobody yet has the answer to that. We're aiming to do it with writing, performance and so on." The problem for the team is that it's difficult to pin down exactly what a videogame is – it's not just the code that comes on the game disc, but the experience of playing and the social aspect of players reacting to it. "The first question and the subject of the first public display is to ask what is the form all about," Newman explains.

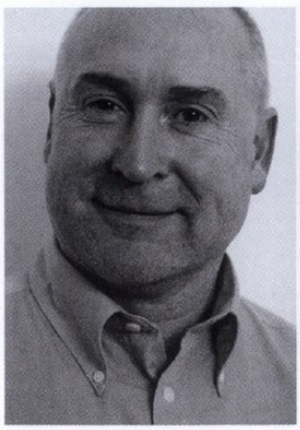
The project will be kicked off at GameCity 3, which will be held between October 30 and November 1 in Nottingham, with the launch of savethevideogame.com, a website that asks its visitors what they think should go into the archive and will solicit contributions to it. Developers including Harmonix, Media Molecule and *Katamari* creator Keita Takahashi will also be donating material to go into the archive. Newman says that getting material from developers is proving easier than the team feared: "Getting it is a matter of asking the right questions. We're confident that we'll get the likes of back-of-envelope design documents."

"The industry isn't doing much to archive its products, such as instruction books, retail releases and so on. There's nothing that's doing to games what the BFI is doing for film"

The National Media Museum, meanwhile, is taking care of how to store and display the objects in the archive. Anyone with a yellowing SNES knows that plastics degrade over time, but Newman claims that the museum's curators know much about preserving them, as well as CDs and DVDs. "The archiving of these important artefacts presents us with some real challenges, not least in the area of preservation," says **Paul Goodman**, the museum's head of collections and knowledge. "We must balance the necessary conservation requirements of these materials with the need to allow the public to understand and interact with them both now and in the future."

The National Media Museum was keen to take on the archive since it recently rebranded from its former name, the National Museum of Photography, Film and Television, and therefore wanted to add digital and interactive material to its collections. The team isn't clear on how long it will be until the archive is permanently located at the museum, but anticipates a series of touring exhibitions once the collection is large enough.

The project joins several other major initiatives that aim to archive videogames, including a collection of 25,000 games in Stanford University's Silicon Valley Archives in California, and a conference at the British Library that considered games as part of a wider discussion on archiving all digitally stored information. "There are many people asking the same questions," says Newman.





Paul Goodman (left), head of collections at the National Media Museum, is responsible for solving how to store and preserve the archive. At Nottingham Trent University, James Newman (centre) and Iain Simons (right) aim to establish what kinds of material should be in it

Continue

Fire control
Or the lack of it. Toasted zebras coming right up

Gaming machines
LBP makes rewiring curiously enjoyable

Remakes
Looking to the past can be inspirational, too

Quit

Tick, tick, boom
Another huge world to explore before deadline?

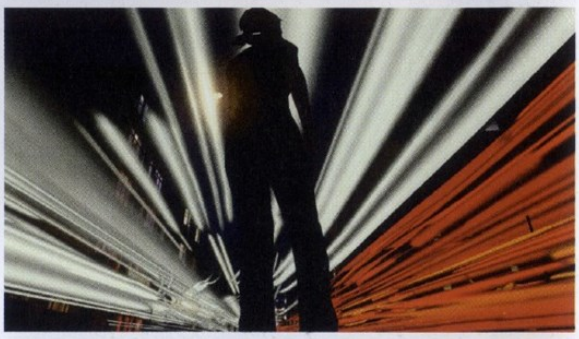
Icelandic meltdown
Though, thankfully, CCP claims it's just fine

Demakes
Anyone else getting tired of 2D pixellated Chiefs?


Designed to bring the thrill of the race home
With Game Mode developed in conjunction with XBOX,
100Hz Motion Plus® for smooth motion handling, blur free action and Full HD 1080p for vibrant pictures and stunning colour resolution, Samsung's new Crystal Design LCD TV range gives you picture quality so good you'll feel like you're in the driving seat. Find out more about our unique features and picture enhancing technology at samsung.com/uk/tvseries
Samsung LCD TV CRYSTAL DESIGN
XBOX 360
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Underground movement

Igloo goes down the tube, as art installations and videogame technology converge yet again



While *SwanQuake* engages with videogames directly, it also suffers from some of its failings, from awkward movement to very occasional draw-distance issues and the odd invisible wall

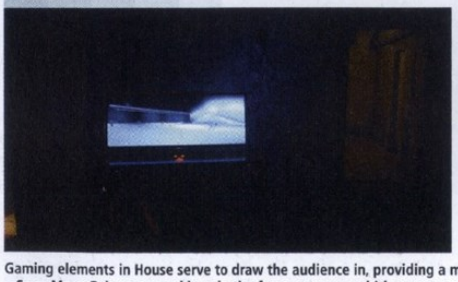
A few minutes with *Half-life 2*, *Super Mario Galaxy* or even *Tetris* might be enough to suggest that videogames have as much in common with architecture and landscape as they do with scorecards and narrative. It's a notion contemporary artists are increasingly starting to explore in works such as SwanQuake, a series of installations utilising 3D computer environments and motion-capture to examine the relationships between technology and human space. An ongoing project by Ruth Gibson and Bruno Martelli, also known as igloo, their most recent exhibition is SwanQuake: House, on display at the V22 Gallery in London until November 3.

House takes the form of a series of derelict basement rooms, the first of which is home to a trackball controller and HD display set into a dressing table. Using the trackball in conjunction with two buttons – forwards and jump – visitors are able to explore Fackin 'ELL, a virtual tube station located on a fictional variation of the Central Line, apparently wedged in next to Liverpool Street. All routes to the surface are blocked by piles of rubble (a design choice that will be instantly recognisable to anyone who's played an FPS in the last ten years), and exploring deeper into the station reveals rooms filled with mysterious dancers, an Escher-like tube platform tacked on at an alarming (and fatal) 45-degree angle, and a burnt-out train carriage. Navigating the carriage leads to a lengthy jaunt down an empty tunnel, until the track fragments and a huge, rocky cavern opens up, offering hints of a volcanic netherworld beyond, before an invisible wall curtails any further exploration.

Brick walls are interspersed with panels displaying brick textures, and a mirror gives a view into a nearly identical computer-generated corridor

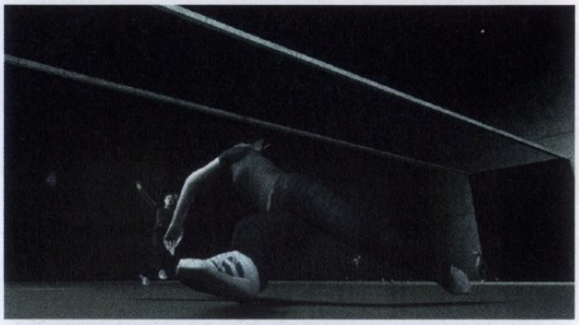
And beyond the dressing-table console itself, the rest of the basement gallery is made up of empty chambers, many of which feature a gentle bleeding of real and virtual elements as brick walls are interspersed with panels displaying brick textures, and a mirror gives a view into a nearly identical computer-generated corridor.

This wider environment, combined with the shuffling, stuttering soundtrack fed through the rooms, invokes an unnerving atmosphere, but most of House's power to involve comes from simply taking a game-like space and shaking almost all of the rules out of it, relying instead on gaming's inherent ability to push its players towards exploration and experimentation. While the name SwanQuake may hint at a tritely defined collision of high- and low-brow cultures, in reality, igloo's co-opting of game mechanics allows for the blurring of boundaries between investigation, deconstruction, and ultimately, participation in the display. One of the more interesting examples of 'game art' yet revealed, it's promising to see work that suggests that other artforms may have as much to learn from game design as game design has already learnt from them.

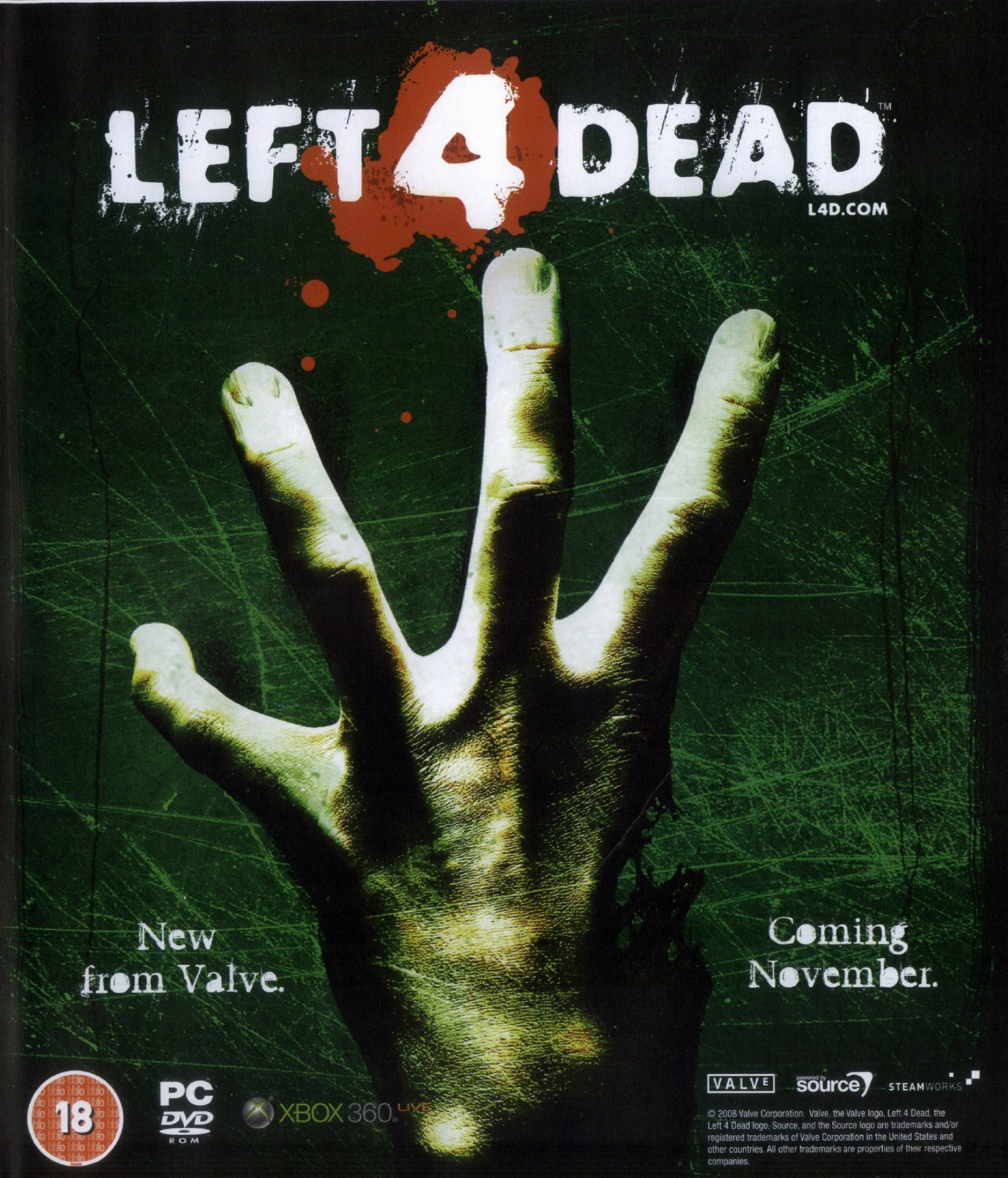




Gaming elements in House serve to draw the audience in, providing a more involved role than the (undeniably impressive) sight of a Sega Mega Drive powered by a bath of tomato soup, a hitherto unexploited solution to the problems of future energy supply



Art provides the opportunity to pass glitches off as insights. Aren't we all, deep down, stuck in rubble at the top of an escalator, trapped behind an awkward bit of geometry?


LEFT 4 DEAD™
L4D.COM
New from Valve.
Coming November.
18
PC DVD ROM
XBOX 360. LIVE
VALVE
powered by source
STEAMWORKS
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INCOMING

New games, and updates on games already on the radar

Rygar: Battle Of Argus

FORMAT: WII **PUBLISHER:** TECMO



So, is it a fancy port of the PS2 game or a new *Project Rygar*? Tecmo said the former a long time ago, but the gorgeous new screens suggest the firm's taking Wii a bit more seriously now

Dynamic Zan

FORMAT: WII **PUBLISHER:** NINTENDO



Nintendo knows what hardcore gamers want: dreamy valkyries fighting hordes of enemies with a MotionPlus sword. Probably right – and anything in-house from Kyoto is one to watch

Professor Layton And The Last Time Travel

FORMAT: DS **PUBLISHER:** LEVEL-5



The conclusion of the DS trilogy, but not the end for Layton, with films and a mobile game in the works. Expect more playful puzzles, a London setting and a talking dessert called Max

Persona 4

FORMAT: PS2 **PUBLISHER:** ATLUS



A move from the city to the country for everyone's favourite split-personality social-networking RPG. It's as gorgeous as ever, and sees a US release on December 9. No news for Europe yet

Castlevania: Judgement

FORMAT: WII **PUBLISHER:** KONAMI



Konami's ghoul-basher staggers forward with news of a link-up to the latest DS side-scroller, online brawling, and the Wii Remote hardware being pressed into service to, yes, control your whip

Tenchu 4

FORMAT: WII **PUBLISHER:** UBISOFT



After the slightly internet-pandering ninja cat, the latest news suggests a more serious return to stealthing, with some clever hiding places, gory fights and, as ever, natty bodysuits

Dead Rising

FORMAT: WII **PUBLISHER:** CAPCOM



Bullshot or hot shot? Early concerns about the number of zombies seem to have been addressed with the latest screens, but who knows if Big Frank's being economical with the truth?

Bejeweled Twist

FORMAT: PC **PUBLISHER:** POPCAP



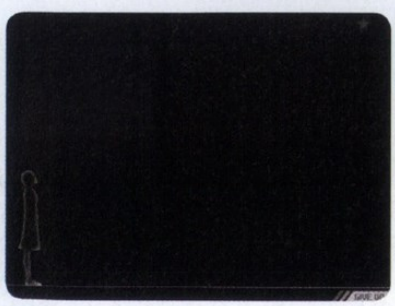
Three years in the making, Popcap's latest promises to bring 'a completely new perspective to the match-three genre'. Hopefully this isn't a twist that will involve a *Tetrisphere*-style outcome

Batman: Arkham Asylum

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3 **PUBLISHER:** EIDOS



Joker and Two-Face appear, but the source here is the comic book series, not the recent movie. Will the 'CSI'-influenced detective sequences play out better than the concept looks on paper?



☐ INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

Hoshi Saga 3 tinyurl.com/4x57vm

'This game is to discover a star covered in a stage' may seem to veer slightly towards Engrish, but it's actually quite precise. You have to find a star to complete each level, but it's not simply hidden behind a curtain. Nor is it even necessarily within the confines of the screen, or in existence when the level begins, or even an entire star. Each stage is a puzzle with its own internal logic and rules that have to be worked out – some beautifully simple, and some almost obtuse.

One or two levels tread a thin line between frustration and teasing, but their eventual answers have a forehead-slapping quality. Others are one-hit jokes and good-humoured pokes at what the most obvious answers could be. It's like *WarioWare* in the way a good idea is thrown at a single stage lasting two or three seconds, then forgotten as another fillip comes into play. There's an excellent afternoon's distraction here, so long as you always remember you're not looking for a star in a stage – but a star covered by one.

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GRENADE

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In association with Screen Digest

Can Nintendo's DSi reignite Japan?

Screen Digest analyst Piers Harding-Rolls takes a look at recent DS sales performance and the new DSi

Japanese market performance for Nintendo in 2008 has been a tale of different sales cycles for the company's two platforms. While DS Lite sales have fallen sharply as the platform's sales cycle goes into decline and market penetration reaches substantial levels (the equivalent of one in six of the Japanese population has bought a DS), in contrast the Wii is experiencing its market peak as sales maintain the fast rate set in 2007.

Although the DS sold 1.6 million units in Japan during the first half of 2008, this represented a substantial and rather rapid decline from first-half 2007 sales of 3.7 million units. Compare this to the performance of the PSP, released around the same time as the DS in Japan, and our long-standing view that the PSP had the technological legs to maintain a longer sales cycle compared to the DS cannot be disputed. PSP sales in the first half of 2008 were almost two million compared to one million in the equivalent period of 2007.

So while the DS has been in heavy decline in Japan, it seems that many consumers are now turning to the PSP in large numbers, not least due to the massive success of *Monster Hunter Portable*, which topped sell-through in Japan in the first half of the year. With DS sales as they are in Japan, a refresh of the DS platform would appear to be in order to regain the initiative, and that's exactly what was announced by Nintendo at its Tokyo press conference in the form of the DSi.

While the DS has been in heavy decline in Japan, it seems that many consumers are now turning to the PSP in large numbers, not least due to the success of *Monster Hunter Portable*

On the surface Nintendo's DSi appears to be a direct response to the multimedia functionality of the PSP and other handheld devices such as the



Monster Hunter Portable and its sequel are enormously popular in Japan because of their multiplayer, which not only allows players to co-operatively hunt and kill monsters, but to get drunk and pass out too. Many thousands of PSPs are used solely to play these games



The last handheld console to ship with camera technology as standard was Tiger's Gizmondo, but Nintendo's spin on the concept should result in more innovation

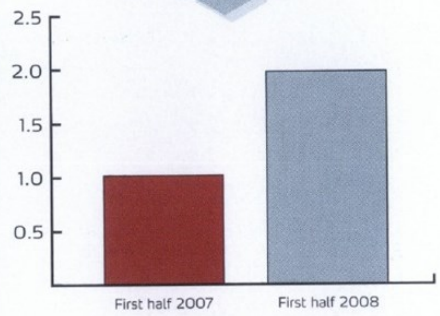


iPod Touch, which are increasingly encroaching on the gaming space. This may be true to a lesser extent, but the DSi's new features – SD card support, dual cameras, dual 3.5-inch touchscreens, on-board web browser and ability to download and store DSiWare content – are also very much a natural evolution of Nintendo's current content and hardware strategies, without necessarily trying to replicate what these other devices deliver to the consumer. What is clear is that game content is increasingly networked or connected via the internet, and that experimentation with methods of interaction with game devices is on the up too, and the DSi follows this trend.

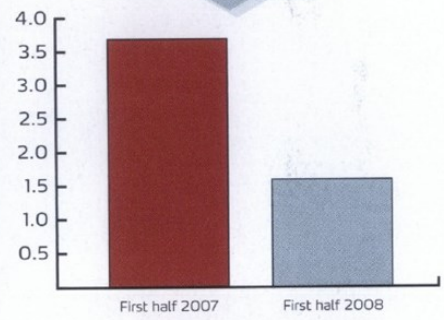
We have all been aware of Nintendo's determination to plough its own furrow to market success in recent years, and as such it is unlikely that the company will have succumbed to competitive pressure from the PSP and produced a me-too product. Yes, the functionality is similar to many mobile and handheld devices on the market, yet it will be the unique experiences and applications Nintendo delivers with this functionality that the company hopes will set it aside from the competition. This upgrade also aligns its handheld platform more closely to the Wii, with enhanced forms of interaction, SD card support, web browser and content download, again a natural product evolution for the company.

So is the DSi enough to reignite Japanese interest in the DS platform? Our graph showing volume of annual sales in Japan for both DS and PSP clearly illustrates the surge in new sales prompted by the launch of the DS Lite in 2006. While purely hardware reasons for upgrade are certainly less emphatic now than they were with the DS and DS Lite, much of the DSi's potential must rest in the applications and experiences that Nintendo can offer using its new features and functionality. These applications and content will aim to deliver a more personalised experience to the consumer, prompting those families that share one or two handhelds to invest in a DSi for each family member. While delivering on this aim represents a considerable challenge, Nintendo's ability to create unique content remains undiminished, and it is this, alongside the Japanese consumers' very content-elastic hardware-buying decision-making, that should result in an upsurge in sales.

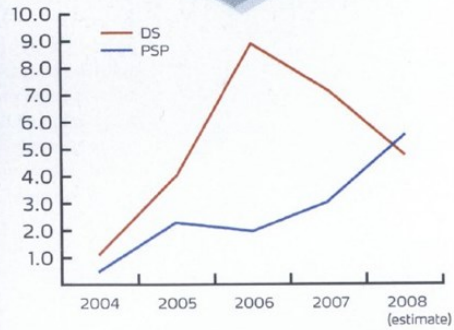
Japanese PSP sales volume (million units): year-on-year growth 91 per cent



Japanese DS sales volume (million units): year-on-year fall 57 per cent



Japanese DS versus PSP annual sales volume since launch (million units)



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Nintendo marches on

Famitsu's Koji Aizawa raises a toast to Nintendo's recent conference

You might have noticed that Nintendo held a conference at the beginning of October. It was filled with announcements and for once felt like a real show, which was enough to get most of us a little excited.

There's no pleasing some people, of course, and there was some moaning about the details of the DSi, in particular the extremely low resolution of one of its cameras. But, overall, feedback is favourable, and there is curiosity over how Nintendo is preparing to power through this new version of its portable and make it a 'must have' for people who currently own a DS Lite.

For them, the bigger screens and thinner body won't be a big enough draw – but the camera and music playback could be. On top of this there's what might be the core of this DS iteration, the browser, shop and capacity for download distribution – as well as the adoption of SD-card storage (which will doubtless have a role in preventing piracy). The device may not have been full of surprises, but you have to admit that Nintendo has covered almost every aspect of what you could do with a portable device. And don't forget it's currently the king of the videogame world in both hardware and software.

The DSi may not have been full of surprises, but you have to admit that Nintendo has covered almost everything you could do with a portable device. And it's currently king of the videogame world in both hardware and software

The PSP is doing well and trying to close the gap on the DS, but Sony's comments that Nintendo's machine is for children are sounding increasingly desperate. Particularly when, in Japan, the biggest titles of all like *Dragon Quest IX* are exclusive to Nintendo's platform, and more developers commit to releasing titles every month.

Now, as for the Wii, attention in Japan at the moment is directed towards *Dobutsu No Mori* (*Animal Crossing*) and *Monster Hunter 3*. What have been shown so far about '*MonHun3*' are only videos, but the addition of aquatic hunting grounds is hugely exciting for fans. This game will be a big magnet for gamers who were previously sticking to their PlayStations, and its possible impact on the Wii can't be understated.

But the biggest title of this conference, at least for me, was Sega's *Let's Tap*. This is the first title to come from Prope, the new company from Sega's former key developer, Yuji Naka. It looks distinctive and exciting, and I have the feeling that this is the kind of title that can trigger a little craze even among families.

Personally that was the biggest surprise for



Hopefully, *Dragon Quest IX* will build on the solid foundations of *DQVIII*, with great voice-acting to go with its many hairstyles

me, though I wasn't expecting the new collection named Wii De Asobu Selection – GameCube games that have been redesigned for the Wii, the first of which will be *Pikmin*. I'm not quite sure if anything is going to be added but we were expecting *Pikmin* to come back, and here it is! For now, at least.

It is almost useless to say that the Japanese merely like videogaming. It would be much more accurate to say the Japanese are *crazy* about videogaming! And up to now gamers have had no other options than going for the PS3, the Xbox 360 or the PSP if they wanted to play the games they were used to. So far, very few gamer-oriented titles have been released on the Wii and, in a self-defeating cycle, those that were sold very little. This conference, though, showed a growing number of these games and I'm interested by that. I wonder if this is the beginning of a shift we'll start to really feel in the near future.





Weekly Famitsu (Enterbrain) Japanese sales: September 15–21

Game/weekly sales/lifetime sales

1. *Pokémon Platinum* (Pokémon Company, DS): 319,052 (1,286,727)
2. *Dragon Ball DS* (BNG, DS): 88,439 (NE)
3. *Rhythm Tengoku Gold* (Nintendo, DS): 40,032 (750,390)
4. *Trusty Bell* (BNG, PS3): 30,403 (NE)
5. *Reborn! Battle Arena* (Marvelous Entertainment, PSP): 24,462 (NE)
6. *Quiz Magic Academy DS* (Konami, DS): 23,214 (126,846)
7. *Wii Fit* (Nintendo, Wii): 22,703 (2,585,986)
8. *Samuraido Portable* (Spike, PSP): 16,178 (NE)
9. *Hakouki* (Idea Factory, PS2): 13,277 (NE)
10. *Mario Kart Wii* (Nintendo, Wii): 12,789 (1,732,177)


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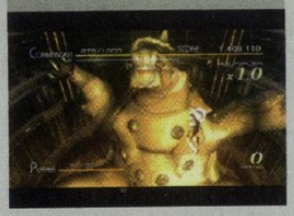
Edge's most wanted

Command & Conquer: Red Alert 3



While we mourn *Tiberium*'s passing, it was always a pretty mad idea. *Red Alert 3*'s combination of Soviet kitsch and war dolphins was always where the series' future lay.
369, PC, EA

Sin And Punishment 2



Well, that came in from the leftfield. Treasure finally makes its way on to Wii with a sequel that few would have expected. Time to brush up on the original, perhaps.
WII, NINTENDO

Punch Out



Sometimes, game series can lose their very essence in the move from 2D to 3D. In this case, though, Nintendo has somehow made its pugilists even more charismatic.
WII, NINTENDO

Minimise to maximise

Size has been conquered, now borders need shrinking



Developers may have the technology to produce play areas of any size they choose, allowing them to create environments far more elaborate than those of the original *Deus Ex* (left), but nailing scale remains a tricky balancing act

By the standards of the time, *Deus Ex* was determinedly epic in the scale of its levels. Playing through the streets and building interiors covering a few city blocks lent it a scope that made it feel real, even if they didn't quite look the part. Its sequel *Invisible War*, in contrast, was densely detailed and compact, a decision perhaps made necessary by the technical limitations imposed by more demanding art direction, but one which made each area feel like a playground obstacle course rather than a believable, liveable city space.

As you might expect after five years of technological progress, Eidos Montreal now has the luxury of creating spaces as vast or as intimate as the game's setting demands at negligible cost to graphical fidelity for *Deus Ex*'s upcoming prequel. In that time, size has shifted from being a hardware issue to a design issue. The difficulty is no longer in the nuts and bolts of creating vast spaces, but in maintaining belief in their peripheries. Games now have a far greater challenge in finding plausible reasons to delineate the play area than making their interiors credible and compelling.

But after a brief obsession with producing open worlds, the industry may be beginning to realise that size isn't everything. While a city setting may become more superficially credible with every extra street, it will also inevitably be ever harder to fill with interesting experiences. *Battlefield: Bad Company*'s heavy reuse of assets ultimately undermined the potential of its rolling landscape, and even in a game as ambitious as *GTAIV* the streets are lined with blankly inaccessible houses and shops.

Increasingly, developers are looking back to the kind of smaller environments of the gaming past, recognising that the kind of openness technology now allows isn't always warranted by design. Will we now see richer, more interactive environments as developers turn their budgets and manpower towards a few blocks rather than the entire city? For a *Deus Ex* game, a series which specialises in environments that bustle with possibility, balancing the scale necessary to make a believable world with its density of play will be vital. You hope they resist the temptation to do less with more.



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360

32 **Prince Of Persia**
360, PC, PS3



34 **Mirror's Edge**
PS3



35 **Quantum Of Solace: The Game**
PS3, 360

36 **Shellshock 2: Blood Trails**
360, PC, PS3

38 **Phantasy Star Zero**
DS



38 **Valkyria Chronicles**
PS3

40 **SOCOM: Confrontation**
PS3



40 **White Gold: War In Paradise**
360, PC

43 **Need For Speed Undercover**
360, PC, PS3



43 **Skate 2**
360, PS3

FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **EPIC GAMES**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER 7**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E184, E187**

Gears Of War 2

Things get grimmer in the shooter sequel. Won't someone throw the COG a bone?





Gears 2 has moved on from the subdued palette of the first game, introducing bright blues and greens in the mountainous countryside while swapping out the dark treacly blood for tomato ketchup. Hopefully, further optimisation will eliminate the texture pop-in evident in the preview code

"One of the problems with videogamers is that they don't take the videogame worlds very seriously," says design director **Cliff Bleszinski**. "It's just like wink-wink, hey, it's a videogame – whatever, right?"

We've obviously got confused: we thought this was exactly the right response to *Gears Of War*'s happily non-cerebral plot with its lunkheaded smack-talk, slavering monsters and supersized weaponry. And, unlike Bleszinski, we didn't think this was a problem at all – we thought it was funny. Bleszinski has news for us. He pulls out a mock-up photograph that will apparently ship with the special edition of the game – a picture of secondary character Dominic Santiago and his wife, taken in happier times before the Locust ravaged the planet of Sera and the two were separated. "I keep it in my wallet," says Bleszinski.



Epic Games wants you to care about its story. *Gears 2* attempts to take a more sombre tone than the first game, inviting gamers to become emotionally involved with the walking boiled hams who make up the cast of space marines. This effort is certainly noticeable during our playthrough of the first act – the gunplay stopping and starting for expositionary cutscenes, prerendered and otherwise. This time around, however, such interruptions can be easily skipped – even the moments when you are reduced to a forced walk, a finger on your earpiece as you communicate with Control.

"If you really can't deal with 30 seconds of dialogue," says Bleszinski, "if it's really that agonising for you, you can just hit the back button and Marcus will be like, 'Enough!' and you just keep going."

And you really do keep going; if the game dares to pause to set the scene then it is a momentary stutter in an otherwise breakneck ride. It turns out that Bleszinski's promise of *Gears 2* being "bigger and more badass" is not just puff, the first act propelling the player through a series of gargantuan set-pieces to dwarf even the largest of those in the previous game. After reacquainting the player with the game's stalwart cover-heavy gunplay, *Gears 2* sees Marcus and Dom take the fight to the Locust – guarding a series of lumbering, caterpillar-tracked derricks as they make their way into the snow-bound countryside to where they hope to drill down into the enemy hive. As the Nemacyst spiral out of the sky to explode in the Alpine scenery, the caravan is assaulted by swarms of enemies, their variety much greater than that of the first game, giving a real sense of a vast marauding war machine. Upstaging the first game's grander moments, a number of the towering beasts that were its major threats find themselves greasing the tracks of the giant derricks. But the Locust Horde has more Brumaks and Corpsers to spare, and soon the COG caravan's numbers dwindle – a mighty attack force reduced to a few, increasingly beleaguered vehicles. One sequence sees a hijacked derrick swing up



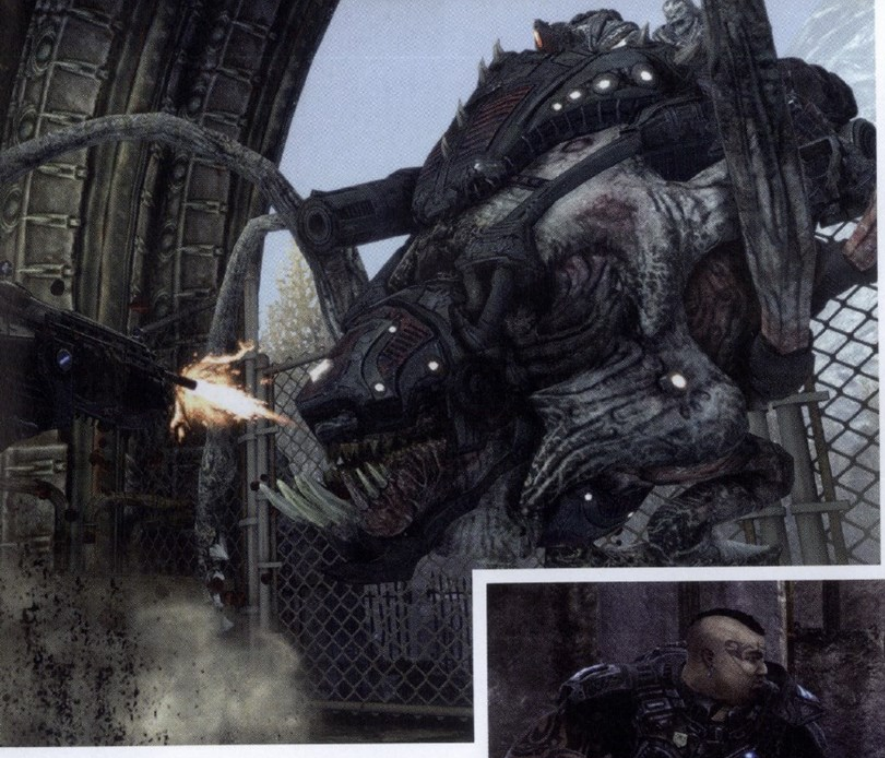
As the Nemacyst spiral out of the sky to explode in the Alpine scenery, the caravan is assaulted by swarms of enemies, giving a real sense of a vast war machine







The Cole Train and Baird take a back seat in the first act of *Gears 2*, replaced by an eccentric Texan and a heavily-tattooed Maori warrior stereotype who periodically offers some vague spiritual platitudes about the nature of fate. We remain eager for Cole to "bring it on, sucka"





When an enemy is downed, each button executes them in a different way. As well as the chainsaw and stomp, you can now flip a locust on to its back and deliver a flurry of punches to its head, or pick it up to use as a shield





Divide and conquer

Forcing co-op players to split up caused frustration in the first *Gears*. Though many such moments occur in the sequel, Epic says it has not been heedless to criticism, now allowing players to select different difficulty levels for each player in the same match to prevent the weaker of the two foiling the mission. But is this really addressing the problem? These sections' difficulty stems from the lack of the revive mechanic which is available when the players are together – perhaps the very feature that makes co-op so much fun. This considered, why split players up at all?



Hitting the active-reload on the flamethrower gives you an extended range – useful for blind firing. Meanwhile, the mortar comes with its own firing minigame – holding down the trigger increases the range, its projectile exploding in mid-air

alongside your own, lurching back and forth as its gruesome, piratical crew exchange shots with your own.

As exciting and visually arresting as this is, however, there is a nagging concern that Epic may have gone for spectacle to the detriment of interactivity. While one player mounts the derrick's mounted gun, cutting down Brumaks and shredding the decks of hijacked vehicles, his co-op partner is left with little to do except to stave off the occasional boarding attempt. Odd though this is, the moment of disorienting obsolescence whizzes by, and soon you find yourselves barrelling through the tight, snow-sprinkled streets of a deserted township, taking out mortar positions to ensure the safe passage of your derrick, before plunging down through Sera's topsoil into act two.

Even if, with some of the larger set-pieces, *Gears 2* manages to look more interesting than it is to play, you are never given a chance to forget just how sturdy a shooter this is. Interspersing the showboating is a welcome number of down-and-dirty gun battles, each of which exploits the environment to keep you moving and wary of being flanked. Epic's supreme competency here is made particularly evident in the multiplayer co-op mode, Horde, which sees players fight off wave upon wave of enemies. It's a fraught affair, always keeping the five players exposed to attack from more angles than they can effectively cover. As the waves move into double figures, you fend off ever more lethal foes: heavily armoured Boomers wielding chainguns, flamers and flails; vicious scampering Sirens, who have a nasty propensity for coming back from the dead; scuttling living explosives called Tickers and mounted Locust riding grotesque, reptilian dog-pigs. Under increased pressure, it becomes hard to keep the squad together, particularly since ammunition and weapons tend to respawn in the least defensible areas.

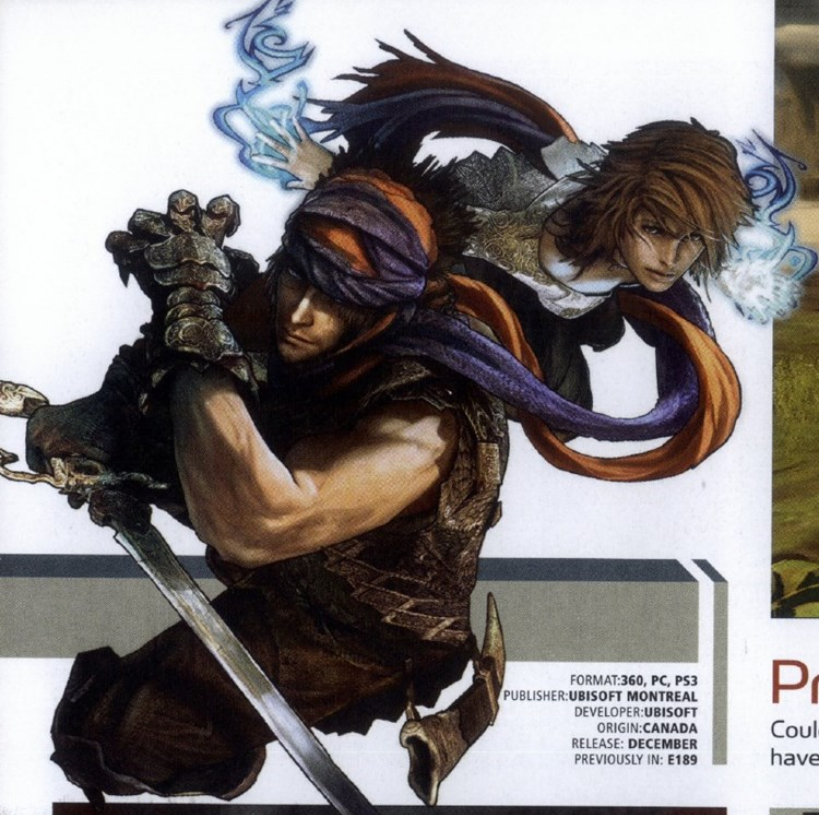
With an improved matchmaking and community system, the multiplayer component of *Gears* will hopefully finally achieve the longevity it deserves. It's difficult to say on the merits of the first act whether the singleplayer campaign will have the same persisting allure once the thrill of its spectacle becomes old. Nonetheless, if it manages to maintain the frantic pace of its opening, then *Gears 2* will deliver a riot of bombastic visuals and delicious sci-fi tosh, enriched as ever by its staples of co-op and cover. The plot may be more po-faced, but like many inadvertent gems of the B-movie genre, it's difficult not to greet it with a big, childish grin.







Occasionally, the original *Gears Of War*'s one-button cover system sent you rolling when you wanted cover, or vice versa. Though refinements to the system make this a rare occurrence in *Gears 2*, the game also offers an alternate control scheme that puts evasion moves on a separate button to cover

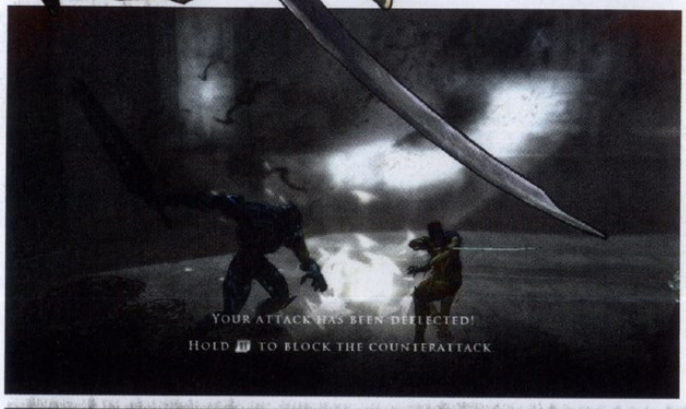




FORMAT:**360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER:**UBISOFT MONTREAL**
DEVELOPER:**UBISOFT**
ORIGIN:**CANADA**
RELEASE: **DECEMBER**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E189**

Prince Of Persia

Could Ubisoft's parkouring Prince have too much of a mind of a his own?



Time spent with the first couple of hours of *Prince Of Persia*, Ubisoft Montreal's reimagining of the series, reveals a smorgasbord of influences. There's a twist of *Ico* in the physicality of the relationship between the Prince and Elika, his female sidekick, as well its brand of spatial orienteering. There's *Shadow Of The Colossus* in its structure – an open world spread around a central hub – as well as in Elika's ability to show the direction of the next destination. There's *Okami* in the showers of flowers and light as evil is cleared from an area. More western inspiration comes in the form of *Uncharted* for the Prince and Elika's relationship and decidedly American countenances, though the script hasn't yet proved as sharp, and the characters are hardly as charming. Elika, in fact, displays little character in these early sections, while the Prince's wisecracks and semi-permanent toothy smirk make him goofier than seems apt for this portentous world of mysterious life forces and shadow beasts.

He's much better in motion, of course, with moves as fluid as *Assassin's Creed*'s Altaïr, but with a more extensive set of fabulous abilities, including the wall running and jumping that defined *Sands Of Time*'s Prince. The difference with that predecessor is a much more streamlined set of controls: the right stick and A pretty much cover everything. Like *Assassin's Creed*'s control scheme, however, it demands that players bend to its own rules – an errant stab at A to prompt the Prince to pull himself on to a ledge will make him jump back off the wall instead. When you relax into the scheme, you'll find him bounding effortlessly through the assault courses that he's given to traverse, but there's often the nagging feeling that you're not fully in control. Even timing jumps doesn't need to be very precise.

The Prince will still fall often, however. Most obstacles require a distinct set of commands to negotiate, which demand a combination of instinct and trial-and-error to determine. Failure is rarely penalised, thanks to a very forgiving checkpoint system in the guise of Elika. Replacing *Sands Of Time*'s rewind, Elika grasps the Prince's hand in a blaze of magical blue light as he plummets and deposits him on the nearest solid ground that he passed.

Elika is present from the game's very



Areas are less self-contained than those of *Sands Of Time*, which often allowed players to pre-plan their path around them. These seem based on more instinctive and flowing progression instead







This QTE (above) kicks in when the Prince is badly wounded. With health only indicated by the hero's appearance, it's hard to gauge exactly when it'll happen. If he's holding his side, then it's wise to avoid getting hit for a short time



The architecture of the areas we've played feels arbitrary, with flagpoles and fissures for handgrips placed to create ascribed paths along vertiginous walls and walkways rather than as part of some credible structure

outset, sweeping up the Prince in her flight from her father and his soldiers. The action follows them as they run to the game's central hub, where they're confronted by her angry parent who, in an ensuing struggle with the Prince, destroys a mysterious blue glowing tree and thus causes the spread of the Corruption. This dark force subsumes the verdant beauty of the world and turns the soldiers into hulking stony beasts. The story is mainly told though its short, focused cutscenes, which, oddly, don't feature the nominal interactivity of those in most other recent Ubisoft games. By pressing the left trigger, however, the Prince can talk with Elika at any time while walking around to add more detail to the tale and their relationship.

Beyond her role in the story, though, it's hard to escape the feeling that Elika is just a MacGuffin to provide new rationales for such worn gaming formulae as checkpoint restarts and double-jumps, as well as a sounding board for the Prince to limply quip to. Add to this her unnerving tendency to skip around a scene to be where she needs to be for a sequence of animation, which will surely be fixed in time for release, and her actions and abilities begin to seem inconsistent – she can magically float in the air, but the Prince needs to carry her when climbing on vines; she's prone to fainting in cutscenes, but is happy to be left to jump tens of metres down a sheer cliff.

Elika, present from the game's very outset, grasps the Prince's hand in a blaze of magical blue light as he plummets and deposits him on the nearest solid ground

During combat, she's mainly there to provide magical attacks, dancing around just behind the Prince to complement his sword and gauntlet moves. Though combat shares a similar penchant for blocking and counterattacks to *Assassin's Creed*, inflicting major damage requires carrying out flamboyant combos built from the three attack types. Some strategy comes in the form of your wall-based attacks, while The Hunter, a beast you'll meet several times in the opening couple of hours, has the ability to switch to states that are only susceptible to one attack type. But, in general, a balance of blocking and button mashing seem to suffice in these early stages, a fact compounded by the Prince's frustratingly sluggish movement in battle.

Elika also stops the Prince from ever actually dying during combat. On taking a number of hits in succession he will hold his side and the next blow will be decided by a single-button QTE. Succeed and the Prince will push the enemy back and recover; fail and Elika repels it and its health is slightly replenished. As a result the fights, which we've only seen as one-on-one encounters, can boil down to attrition – employ bad technique and they are prolonged.

How the rest of the game develops has yet to be seen, of course, but there's something about the inevitability of progress due to the ease of restarts, the impossibility of being beaten in combat and the slightly involuntary nature of the Prince's movement that makes these initial moments feel rather slighter than they should. Hopefully, the rest of the game will engender a better feeling of involvement.



Power progression

The central hub features a floor that's decorated with a map of the areas in need of purging. The same map is available with a press of the back button to select locations so Elika can show the way to them. Within a location will be a magical floorplate at which Elika can release the forces of nature, as well as a series of 'light seeds'. These are scattered around the area to give the Prince acrobatic challenges. Collection of enough earns him the choice of a magical power when he returns to the hub, and the map also enables fast-travel to previously visited locations. These give the Prince and Elika abilities that open access to new areas in time-honoured *Metroid* style.

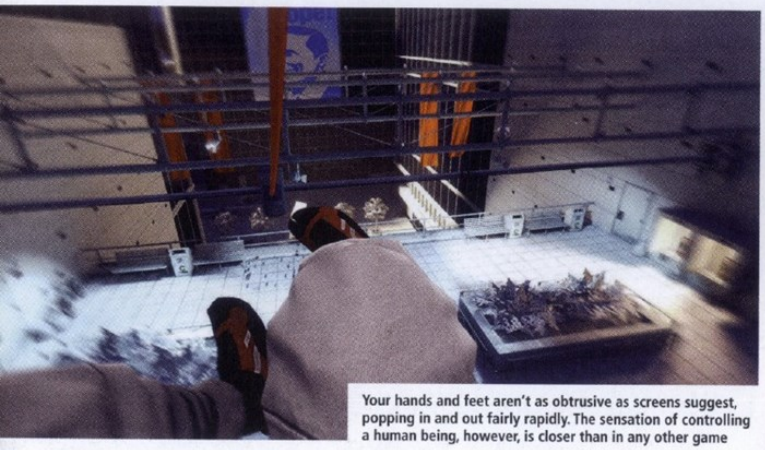


The semi-cel-shaded characters can look rather rough against backdrops that fade into painterly washes of colour and form

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **DICE**
ORIGIN: **SWEDEN**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER 14**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E178, E187**

Mirror's Edge

EA and DICE discover that you can run forever, after all



Your hands and feet aren't as obtrusive as screens suggest, popping in and out fairly rapidly. The sensation of controlling a human being, however, is closer than in any other game





Mirror's Edge, close as it is to release, already has the world behind it, but, we suspect, still isn't yet fully understood. As attractive as its clean good looks are, its abstinence from the weapons that popularly define any firstperson game could prove puzzling for some.

Solving a lot of this will be down to EA's marketing, but its early stages, a build of which we've played, will be the test of DICE's ambitions. It's a test that the game passes easily. Though the tutorial has a worrying knack of over-complicating things, thankfully, once the game proper begins, you realise DICE has created a world that's both visually arresting and beautifully functional.

Executing an unbroken flow from A to B is what *Mirror's Edge* is all about; stringing together a few moves increases your speed, and there's a purity and zing to bouncing between surfaces and popping over a low handrail in one smooth motion. Red environmental elements, which act as targets for you to hasten to, might initially seem condescending in labouring the obvious, but in fluid play they become enormously welcome. They allow the player to focus on reaching a destination swiftly, without too much stop-start exploring or trial and error.

They also help with what may be the biggest difficulty for *Mirror's Edge* – a player's usual instincts in firstperson mode. The designation of FPS is useless here, unless it's repurposed to Fast-Paced Stunts, and overcoming inclinations toward caution and inertia in firstperson should perhaps have been one of the tutorial's priorities. Instead, the police bring it home. The first time they appear, your gravelly voiced navigator simply tells you to run. As they block one route, you change direction and keep running, looking for those flashes of red that offer a way to maintain momentum, even when you're sprinting at full tilt at what looks like a dead end. Such leaps of faith are exhilarating.

The pressure forces you to keep moving, to try new combinations, and only very rarely are you forced to confront an enemy physically. The opportunity to disarm an opponent is brief, though this can be widened using bullet time accumulated through earlier stunts. Two or three police will easily down you in seconds, so it's far more effective to dash around them, stopping only to wallkick or slide at single enemies directly in your path.

Stepping back from these breathless sequences, you can see the linearity of the routes you've been channelled down. But *Mirror's Edge* is clever at making the world look open and occasionally offers multiple routes to a red destination. It's not unusual to find straight runs over and under obstacles for building momentum, while for every jump that needs precision and timing there's a stretch to build up some speed. And for every misjudgment, there's an instant restart.

This last point helps immensely with the game's only serious problem, which will hopefully be tweaked: pipes. Jumps between them often end with a miss, due to a rare moment of counter-intuitiveness and the tendency for the view to clip right through the geometry of the target. It's a small falter in a control scheme that's otherwise an absolute triumph.

Minor gripes aside, *Mirror's Edge* looks like a brave new direction for firstperson games, and it plays like one. Your first steps are bewildering, but they soon become bewitching and even oddly familiar. DICE's game offers plenty that's new, but some that's old and borrowed too. It isn't an FPS, not as we think of them. It's a Full-on Platformer, Stupid.



Who's the lamest of them all?

There's an oddly gauche quality to the script that, in the context of the game's freedom from conventional mores, makes characters seem very out of place. It's painfully conscious of being right-on and urban-centric, and not helped by the animation style that's been adopted for cutscenes. Many of the NPCs prove irritating, and Faith's own pronouncements rarely hit the spot. At one point, a character asks her if she's seen the news. "It's not news, it's advertising," she sombrely intones. The option to skip such interludes is one that will be getting some use.





The window for disarming assailants is small, and Faith can't take many hits before crumpling. There's an Achievement on Xbox 360 for completing a level without being hit, which is harder than it seems – one or two shots always seem to land







Sneaking along a window ledge pushes the camera out into thirdperson, and invokes memories of Solid Snake as Bond sneaks past a patrolling spotlight. Detection means instant death, which isn't as annoying as it sounds, due to well-placed checkpoints

Quantum Of Solace: The Game

Cramming two films into one title seems little trouble for Treyarch – but it has had a little help from its friends





With mainly close-quarters multiplayer shown so far, it's hard to tell if the shotgun is as overpowered as it seems. It's capable of one-shot kills from a surprising distance

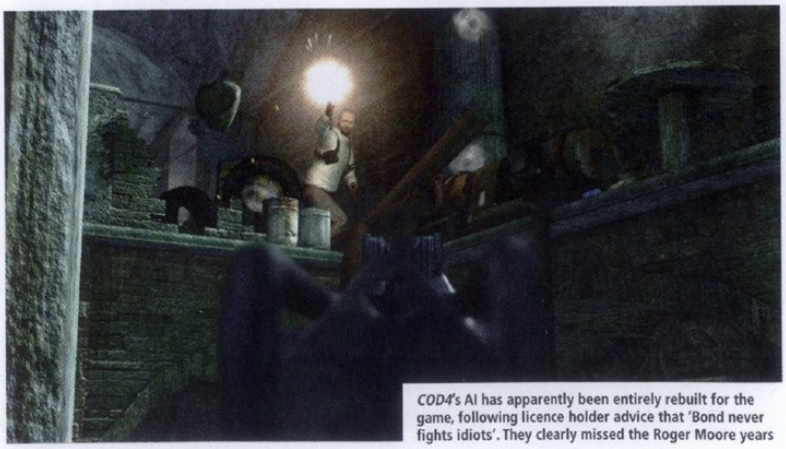
FORMAT: **PS3, 360**
PUBLISHER: **ACTIVISION**
DEVELOPER: **TREYARCH**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **OCTOBER 31 (UK), NOVEMBER 7 (US)**

Any Bond film's success relies in part on comforting predictability. Even drastic reboots like Casino Royale know better than to deviate from a few treasured basics, be it fast cars, holiday settings or the whimsical notion that it's the British Empire that's been quietly holding the world together all these years. The games have a similarly predictable fate: whether it's a movie tie-in or an extra-curricular caper, there will always be the reputation of a certain *GoldenEye* looming before the first tranquiliser dart has been fired.

But with Treyarch handling the latest outing, Rare's ageing masterpiece is joined by another, younger touchstone: Infinity Ward's *Call Of Duty 4*, which provides both engine and control scheme. A few recent rounds of multiplayer certainly seem to suggest that, as a Bond game, *Quantum* is shaping up to be a brisk, energetic and entirely enjoyable addition to the *COD* franchise.

The fatigues may have been replaced with pinstripes, but from the moment you first step into the golden afternoon sun of Embassy, a map based around a large African consulate, both the lighting and the textures have an unmistakable *Modern Warfare* tinge. Thirdperson cover aside, the controls and gunplay are almost identical too. That's not to say it's a disappointment: Embassy is a pacy multiplayer map, with a warren of rooms folded around a central courtyard, a space made deadly by the two tiers of balconies surrounding it and, above that, a tiled roof built with sniping in mind.

Tactical deployment of rooftops seems to be in vogue, with a second multiplayer map, Sienna, transforming an innocent muddle of chimneys and cramped awnings into a quick-turnover bloodbath begging for headshots and ambushes. Both maps provide swift, immediate fun, and the economy which allows for weapon upgrades combined with the simple class system confirms that no one's been dissecting Infinity Ward's tactics as much as Treyarch. And yet, despite having Daniel Craig's oddly thuggish character model in your sights half the time, the licence consistently struggles to make itself felt.



COD4's AI has apparently been entirely rebuilt for the game, following licence holder advice that 'Bond never fights idiots'. They clearly missed the Roger Moore years

Things get a little more Bond-like with the singleplayer campaign, however, a rain-soaked infiltration mission set against a European backdrop effortlessly capturing the espionage atmosphere, while the objective sees you sniping rooftop patrols before stealthing down an alleyway and scaling your target building. But once your cover's blown, the game scrambles for safety behind gameplay that could have been lifted from Pripiat or the Middle East, with a race across a rooftop under helicopter fire while enemies swarm in. Elsewhere, a train sequence suggests Treyarch is at least facing down its *GoldenEye* demons, with a mix of interior blasting and carriage-top sniping varying the pace in what is otherwise an extremely pretty but prolonged corridor encounter.

It's entirely plausible that *Quantum* may be the most capable Bond-flavoured game since Rare ruined the fun for everyone else. That said, the gameplay remains so tightly linked to its source there's a real chance that no amount of upmarket globetrotting will trick you into thinking you're playing something new. The multiplayer suggests that, at the very least, you can treat this as a *Modern Warfare* map pack, but the target audience may discover that 007 himself is largely undercover on this mission.



On golden Bond

Alongside deathmatches and territory control modes, multiplayer gets a slightly familiar shot in the arm from Golden Gun, a gametype that sees players fighting over a single super-powered weapon. But great power comes with great responsibility, and, due to its explosive shots anyone using the Golden Gun in tight quarters is liable to blow themselves up in the process, while ownership also makes them visible through walls, turning them into a prime target for other players. Similarly vindictive is Bond Versus mode, the versus in question being everyone else on the map, tasked with hunting a single player down while they in turn rush to defuse bombs.

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EIDOS**
DEVELOPER: **REBELLION**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **Q1 2009**

Shellshock 2: Blood Trails

All the horror and trauma of war – with added zombies and hotpants



The lighting in the early mazes of dark corridors is excellent, something unfortunately lost when you move into the jungle. It's not shy about *Soldier Of Fortune*-esque gore, either, allowing you to shoot up corpses

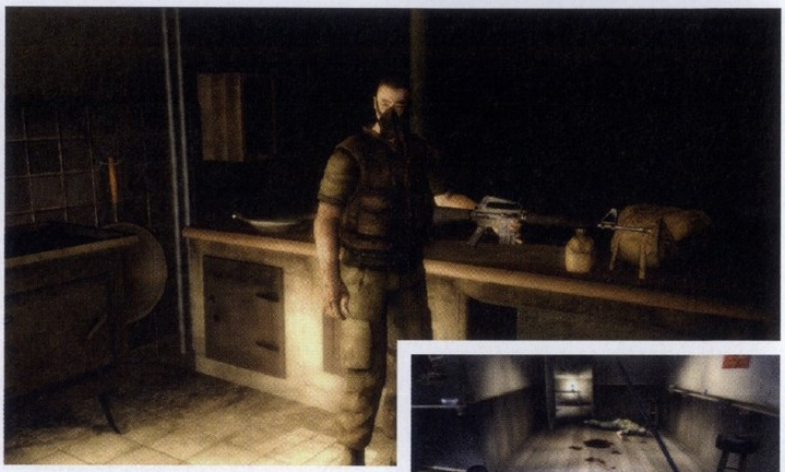


Whiteknight story

The hints about Whiteknight suggest some sort of psychoactive drug that the US military is testing on its own soldiers, and after *Haze*'s botched attempt at the same there's yet a glimmer of hope that *Shellshock 2* can deliver a memorable war narrative. This approach is also a convenient excuse for introducing running zombies, presumably your former comrades, in steadily increasing numbers – by the end of our demo time we were escaping on a boat with a handful of marines while the raging creatures filled the shoreline.







QTEs are triggered by surprise attacks from the likes of this fellow – though on the PS3 they're survived by hefty Sixaxis-waggling. Well, at least it's not a balancing test

That subhead's one effort. 'The horror, the horror, the hotpants' would be another. *Shellshock 2* is a game with admirable intentions that initially impresses with both its subject matter and the execution of its grimy locations. And then opens itself up for cheap gags.

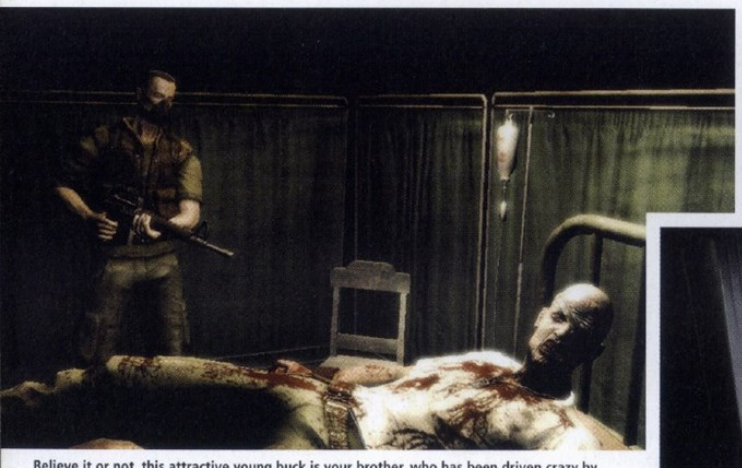
It's a promising beginning. A dark, filthy field hospital, a general with a penchant for frank language, and screaming victims of unknown attacks. Moving through, you get snatches of backstory before the game's first horror moment. Pandemonium breaks out as the building's locked down and becomes a quarantine zone, while you try escape through a Vietnamese attack. There are some effective *COD4*-like scripted moments, and the game proper begins.

It establishes its oppressive atmosphere well, and the helpless soldiers and blood-smeared walls of this first location stay with you as you begin moving through the more traditional shooter fare of its subsequent levels. There's still the odd surprise, however, and not in an entirely good way. A scripted moment triggers at the end of one section as a grenade blast knocks your character backwards. He begins blacking out, brief glimpses of the carnage can be seen as his eyes flicker shut, and another soldier can be seen trying to drag victims to safety. All goes silent.

After a pause, you wake up next to a pair of shapely ankles. Obviously intrigued, the camera pans up... and up, and up, taking in the full glory of a finely sculpted, tanned pair of legs, topped off with some tiny camo hotpants. Amid the blood, grime and broken men, you could be forgiven for a little surprise when first meeting the sassy Serena – she's even twisted her army shirt into some sort of bra. Then, she asks if you "wanna touch" and insists you're going to show those other boys how a "real man" looks after a woman. And all the hard work up to that point goes out of the window.

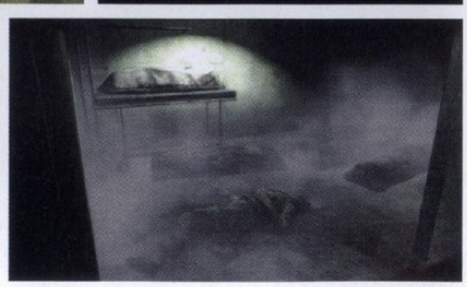
Shellshock 2 is trying to create a world of dread, of swift and shocking violence in cramped locations and chaotic firefights that leave few alive, but it sacrifices that tone for a moment that adds little to the experience. Further on from this, Serena is downed by one of the raging zombies that begin to infest the levels. Whether this means that the entire set-up is some kind of elaborate parody, or (more likely) heralds her return as some kind of sexy zombie hardly seems to matter.

Hopefully these moments are isolated hiccups rather than a general wavering of atmosphere and tone, and in the context of the first few levels, playing it for laughs is something *Shellshock 2* should avoid. The basic gunplay is solid enough, and there's promise in the tale of a drug-fuelled US military trying to cover its tracks in Vietnam. If the hotpants are kept in their drawer, this could be a welcome surprise in the fallow post-Christmas period.



Believe it or not, this attractive young buck is your brother, who has been driven crazy by Whiteknight but somehow survived the exposure. Hence the reason for your involvement: genes







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FORMAT: **DS**PUBLISHER: **SEGA**DEVELOPER: **SONIC TEAM**ORIGIN: **JAPAN**RELEASE: **DECEMBER 25 (JAPAN), TBA (UK, US)**

Phantasy Star Zero

Sonic Team's latest could make DS even more addictive – online and off



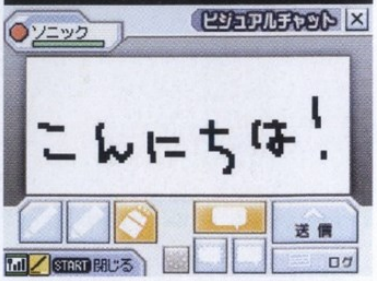
Virtual chat at work (right). It has a similar style to the emotes from Dreamcast's *Phantasy Star Online*, and we're sure some players will manage highly creative insults

With the PSP game breaking Sega's sales records every week since release, the announcement of *Phantasy Star Zero* for DS seemed a little inevitable. Following in the footsteps of Sega's *World Destruction: Michibikareshi Ishi*, *PSZ* is being comprehensively backed, with an official song from a popular Japanese artist, celebrity voice actors, the writer and character designer of *The Idolmaster*, and a 2GB game cartridge stuffed with FMV directed by the production company Gonzo.

There's even a game in there somewhere, and a technically impressive one. *PSZ* is rendered in 3D that must surely be stretching the limits of what the platform can handle and, although the game comes with a singleplayer story mode, the core is its network aspect. Up to four players can join quest together via an ad-hoc connection or wifi, and the game allows parties to be composed of any mix of friends or online strangers in an effort to keep the spirit of *Phantasy Star Online* intact.

A new feature for network play is a Pictochat clone or, as Sega prefers to call it, 'virtual chat'. Used to input messages or pictures on the touchscreen, the message appears above your character's head, unobtrusively moving to the side of the screen when more than one is present. Cleverly, messages can also be saved on the game card to be used as a personalised shortcut menu during chat.





The character-creation process is based on three basic attributes, which can then be tweaked further with the usual array of items, weapons and other accessories

PSZ will undoubtedly fly in Japan, and its established online brand and ad-hoc capabilities on the territory's most popular handheld may give it a chance to step into that *Monster Hunter*-shaped hole in the DS lineup.

Valkyria Chronicles

War is hell, but that doesn't stop it from being cute

FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **WOW ENTERTAINMENT**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **OCTOBER 31**



Not two minutes before he is splitting enemy heads with rifle fire, our hero is gazing upon a school of fish, philosophising on the pastel-shaded beauty of the natural world. It is indicative of much of *Valkyria Chronicles*, a title keen to warn of the horror of military conflict without mussing its well-coiffed anime hair in the process. To that end, it plays its strategic game of soldiers from a distance, and war is a far less bitter pill to swallow from the commander's chair.

Combat is a mix of *Fire Emblem* and *Eternal Sonata* (another title that dances around its supposedly grim subject matter – illness and mortality). The former offers the rock-paper-scissors troop relationship – infantry beat anti-tank which beat tanks which beat infantry – while the latter game's action points are used to limit the realtime options available during each unit's turn. Of course, tactics extend far beyond *Eternal Sonata*'s hack-'n'-slash antics, with cover and terrain as important as foe perforation. Here, the incongruously dainty world is transformed into a satisfyingly efficient warzone, twee sandbags and colourful unit uniforms providing the visual clarity tacticians need.

This same clarity is less pleasing in the copious number of cutscenes that intersect the battles. Regularly told that our hero is a gentle soul spurred on by his love of the natural world, there is little evidence of the splendour that so enamoured him. Simple cel-shading is disguised with a pencil-shading effect, a kind of deliberately innocuous scribbling over shadowed areas that actually tends to draw the eye to just how computer-generated the remaining world is. Whether a later shift of location will see worthier sights unfold is unknown. For now, we must fight on in a world that sacrifices meaning for aesthetics, and disappointing ones at that.



Physicality plays a great part in your strategy. Vehicles have weak points – power cores conveniently placed on the rear – and headshots will take down a foe in short order





The command phase is unusual in that units aren't limited to a single action – instead you have a set number of actions to use as you see fit. You can take direct control of characters, but it will use up your Command Points



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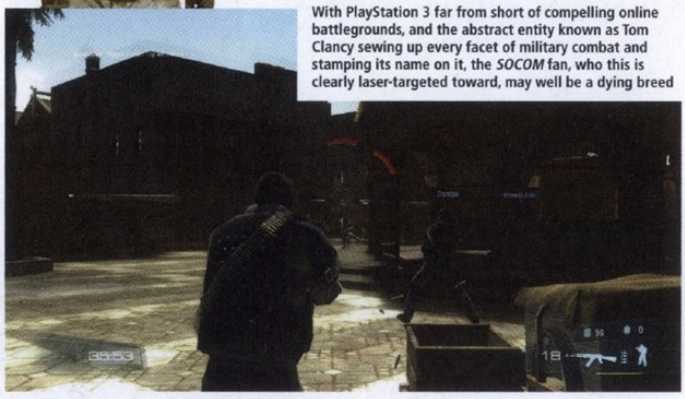
FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SCE**
DEVELOPER: **SLANT SIX GAMES**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **OCTOBER**



SOCOM: Confrontation

Slant Six Games confronts the past and evades the future

With Zipper Interactive occupied with the enigmatic *Massive Action Game* project, it's fallen to Vancouver-based Slant Six Games to take the helm of the smaller-scale *SOCOM Confrontation*, a PS3 bow for the initially gimmick-led tactical shooter series. The title will once again provide a launchpad for Sony's official voice-chat headset, but this time does away with the traditionally unremarkable singleplayer campaign entirely, focusing instead on 32-player online conflict.



With PlayStation 3 far from short of compelling online battlegrounds, and the abstract entity known as Tom Clancy sewing up every facet of military combat and stamping its name on it, the *SOCOM* fan, who this is clearly laser-targeted toward, may well be a dying breed

Citing a desire to reign the series back to the values of *SOCOM II* – smaller, more intimate maps and exclusively on-foot skirmishes – at first glance you'd be forgiven for assuming Slant Six had taken this remit of emulation a mite too literally. Based on the public beta, *Confrontation*'s is a world of muddied textures and conservative polygon budgets, and barring a more treacly walking speed and laborious reload action, the combat hasn't advanced in any meaningful way since that first sequel. There's little in the way of bombast and pyrotechnics to tempt *Call Of Duty* fans away, nor is there the snappy, accessible cover system of *Rainbow Six Vegas*, with clumsy Sixaxis leaning a poor substitute. What remains is a hugely understated and moderately undercooked tac-shooter, which appears little more than an offhand apology to *SOCOM*'s loyal core fanbase for PS2's systematic failure to nurture an online community. The agenda lurking behind the public beta is no doubt as much about placating the highest percentage of vocal forum dwellers as it is fixing netcode and squashing bugs.





Proximity voice chat allows you to whisper into the ears of your victims or, more realistically, accidentally give away the whereabouts of your prize sniper mere moments before you buy the farm yourself

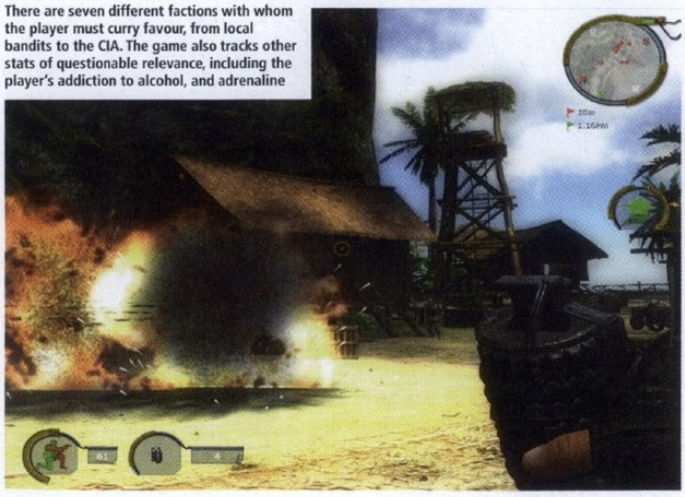
Still, with the sparse Crossroads map from the beta another in a long line of nostalgic throwback features, there's some hope that the bespoke maps will deviate from the plundered previous-gen layouts. Whether they can elevate the game beyond single-minded fan service and charm players away from the bolt-on multiplayer offerings of weightier releases, though, remains to be seen.

FORMAT: **360, PC**
PUBLISHER: **PLAY TEN**
DEVELOPER: **DEEP SHADOWS**
ORIGIN: **UKRAINE**
RELEASE: **2009**

White Gold: War In Paradise

Deep Shadows goes for round two with the open world – grannies with grenades permitting, naturally

Going on past form, the chance of Deep Shadows overreaching itself has surely soared with every square mile that it has added to *White Gold*'s world. The developer's preceding RPG shooter, *Boiling Point: Road To Hell*, brimmed with so many possibilities that it was condemned to an inept, buggy execution. It's not yet clear that *White Gold* will avoid the same fate.



There are seven different factions with whom the player must curry favour, from local bandits to the CIA. The game also tracks other stats of questionable relevance, including the player's addiction to alcohol, and adrenaline

Giving the player an archipelago of tropical islands to roam and occasionally ruin, *White Gold*'s world is a continuously surprising mix of superficial realism and the deeply mad. It is difficult to tell whether this tonal shift is always intended. Shortly after arriving on one of the main islands, we find ourselves consoling a man who has crashed his car into a giant spider. Later we come to the aid of a scuba diver whose friend has become trapped in a cave after being mauled by a fish, but just as we dip a toe in the water three gunboats turn up and kill everyone for no easily discernible reason.

Our time with the game amply demonstrates the variety and number of the quests. One of the more verbal missions sees us attempt to talk a suicidal man down from a ledge. Our intervention just makes things worse – he chooses to blow himself up with a grenade rather than jump. So we decide to try a bit of action instead, attempting to steal a helicopter from a government camp. Unfortunately, we aren't yet sufficiently skilled to use the sights on our guns, and are quickly swatted by a crack squad.





Flying and driving aren't limited by RPG progression, but most vehicles will need a key or a high lock-picking skill to open, meaning the start of the game is spent on foot

White Gold promises to be baffling and erratic – simulatory detail in areas that don't really merit it, absurdist wish-fulfilment in others. But it's difficult to dislike: whatever its flaws, there's unlikely to be an experience quite as broad and thoroughly lunatic until Deep Shadows releases its next game.

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15

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FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **EA BLACK BOX**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER 21**

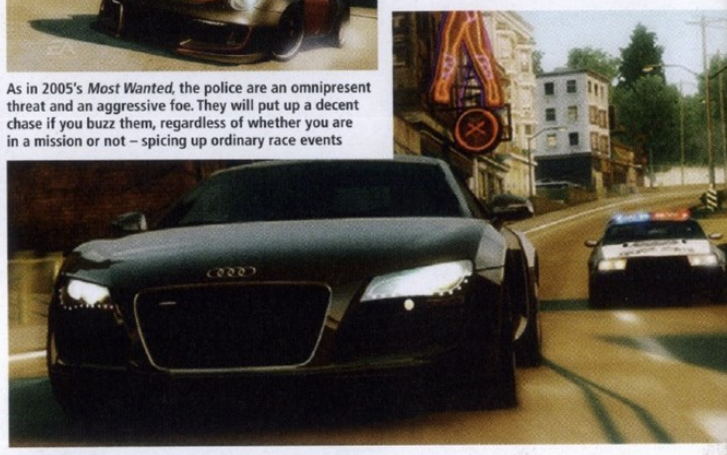
Need For Speed Undercover

Organised crime brings a discerning taste in alloy wheels to EA's ride-pimping racer





As in 2005's *Most Wanted*, the police are an omnipresent threat and an aggressive foe. They will put up a decent chase if you buzz them, regardless of whether you are in a mission or not – spicing up ordinary race events



"Neon is dead. The Batmobile is in." So says **Jesse Abner**, producer on *Need For Speed Undercover*. Apparently, customisation culture is no longer about Tango-coloured dragon decals and flashing fibre-optic wheel lights. Duly, *Need For Speed* has exchanged the vulgarity of car-park doughnuts for police intrigue. Maggie Q brings a touch of Hollywood to the proceedings, playing a sultry federal agent, issuing orders to you from stern, minimalist interiors in which light is so scarce it has to be sparingly portioned into smoky beams.

While *Undercover*'s FMV sequences try to concoct some kind of motorised version of Infernal Affairs, the game gives you 160km of open roads to spin around, spattered with missions and events that can be accessed instantly from the map screen. It's a refreshingly unfussy interface and, so long as you aren't already in a race, you can go straight to your garage and swap cars instantly. Our hands-on preview code offers only a small number of events – a straight-up race, two highway battles (where the objective is to get a certain distance ahead of another vehicle), and a theft event, in which we find ourselves having to slip away from the fuzz in a recently pinched cop car.



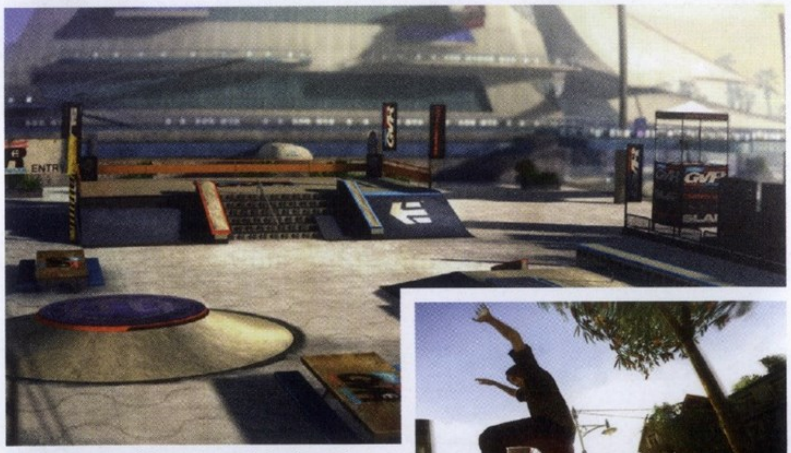
Undercover brings in a level system, allowing you to spend XP on your wheelman's skills. Whether or not this will undermine the need to tune your vehicle remains to be seen. Quick-race mode gives you immediate access to high-performance kit

It really is the richness and variety of these events on which the game will hinge – the open city itself doesn't feel as alive with interest as *GTAIV*'s and, without the kind of inspired carnage of *Burnout Paradise*, there isn't much reason to spend time outside of the races themselves. Handling has issues at this stage of development: an unnerving delay between controller and car, made worse by a huge analogue dead zone, makes cornering a mess of oversteer. *Undercover* may tie it all together in an attractive way, but we're still wary of the end result. No amount of go-faster stripes can turn a Nova into a Veyron, after all.

Skate 2

Grabs and flips are all very well, but the best thing is finding our feet

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **EA BLACK BOX**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **2009**



With the exception of the giant storm drains that made up *Skate*'s Hellevator, there were few areas that really made use of verticality. *Skate 2* now opens up the mountainside on New San Vanelona's horizon, allowing players to participate in vertiginous death races and grisly Hall of Meat events





Though you can drop your skateboard to grab other objects, a quick button-press causes it to fly back into your hand. Since it's modelled as a physical object, you can even use this feature to clock other skaters on the head

Fine game though it was, *Skate* did a rather cruel thing. It held out the promise of exploring a sprawling city, but then fixed you to four small wheels easily thwarted by stairwells and steep inclines. *Skate 2*, blessedly, allows you to step off your skateboard – you can even leave it behind – allowing you to clamber all over the city of New San Vanelona.

However, conquering a flight of steps isn't the only reason to get off your board. This time you are able to grab nearly every object that isn't nailed down and tug it around, constructing new lines and obstacle courses out of piled-up park benches, skips and bins. The AI skaters who populate the city are suitably smarter, recognising and avoiding obstructions, or incorporating them into their own tricks.

Your own repertoire of moves has been doubled, but doesn't feel bloated; Black Box has left itself room to expand, now combining *Skate*'s existing intuitive controls to create even more variety. The decision to include the mongo push may have seemed superfluous in *Skate*, but it has evolved in the sequel, since each foot button now works separately in the middle of a move, allowing you to perform hand-plants while waggling your feet in the air. Hit both buttons mid-ollie as you approach a hurdle and your skater will leap over it as the board goes skittering beneath.

Recognising that a brutal face-plant was as satisfying as any other move in the game, Black Box has turned the Hall of Meat into a *Pain*-style game mode, rewarding players for wiping out in the most wince-inducing ways. This mode is the game's only sign of silly-but-fun excess. Elsewhere, *Skate 2* is a matter of sensible iteration, polish and minor revision – a fittingly modest advancement for a franchise that excels at coolly understated simulation.


Choose a side. 31.10.08
Go to battle with one of three different factions in the new Red Alert 3. Win glory for the Soviet Empire, defend the homeland with the Allied Forces, or combine technology and mysticism with the Empire of the Rising Sun. Play online with a friend or choose from a group of AI commanders and fight to see who controls the land, sea, and air. Join the fight today!
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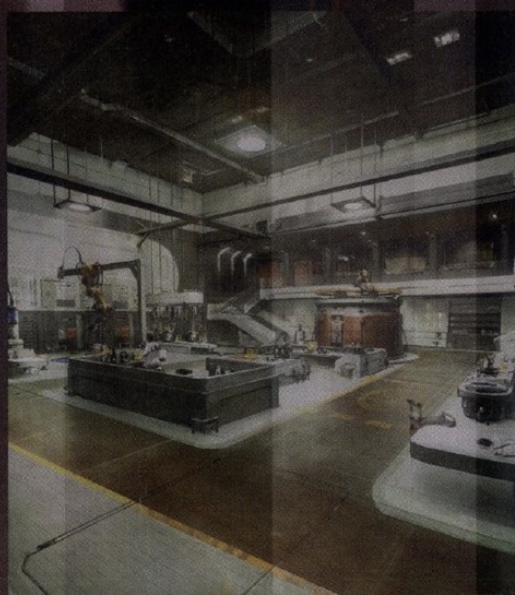
















Augmented reality



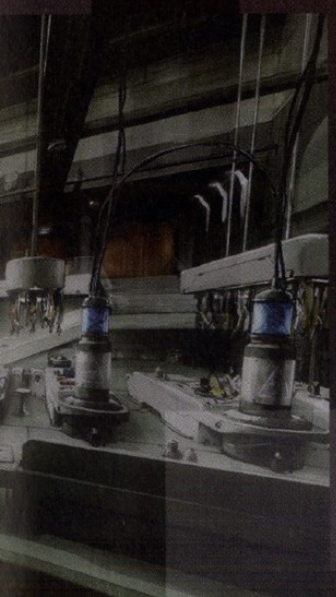
We squeeze through an air vent and eavesdrop on Eidos Montreal's plans to resurrect the seminal conspiracy-obsessed RPG-shooter series, Deus Ex

TITLE: **DEUS EX 3**
FORMAT: **PC, TBA**
PUBLISHER: **EIDOS**
DEVELOPER: **EIDOS MONTREAL**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **TBA**

A mysterious plague sweeps the Earth. Mutilated cows are found lying in fields. Civilisation is facing collapse as mechanically modified humans corral the downtrodden and black helicopters prowl the skies. And behind these things a very select few individuals might perceive the subtle machinations of ancient secret societies, shadowy government agencies and other clandestine organisations trying to shape the future of humanity. *Deus Ex* may have never strayed far from pulp conspiracy theory, but in its diligent excavation of every paranoid fantasy known to man it created a profound sense of impending apocalypse. The third game in the series is a prequel, set in 2027, 25 years before the events of *Deus Ex*, but even though players will know how it all turns out, Eidos Montreal says it has been careful to maintain that cloying fear of the future.

In both games, the culmination of such fear – of technology, of bio-engineering and of artificial intelligence – begs the question of what humanity might become in the wake of these things. And in number three, just as in *Deus Ex*, the answer is you. Whereas JC Denton, the protagonist of the first game, was a nano-augmented man, threatening to make those with the less durable, surgically inserted mechanical attachments obsolete, *Deus Ex 3* sees you play Adam Jensen, a security specialist working for one of the biotech corporations manufacturing the earliest transhuman modifications.

"There's a lot of competition for this





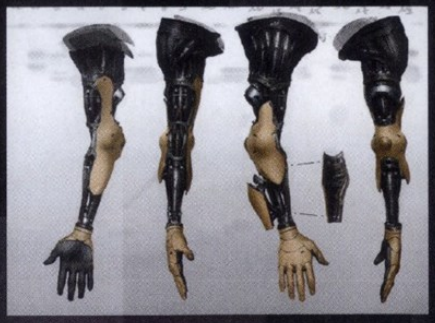


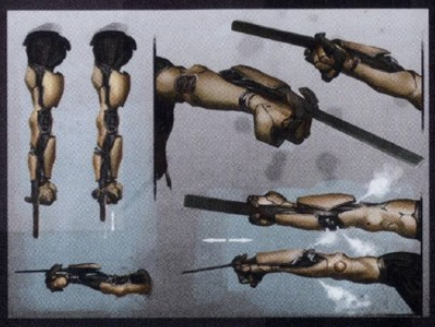






Deus Ex 3 suggests that, as humanity looks to its future, embracing the mechanical modification of the body, its culture and fashion looks to its past. "The analogy with the Renaissance comes from this aspect of transformation," says Dugas





"Today, human beings are comfortable enough with their understanding of the body to begin integrate technology with it," says Dugas. But not everyone will be quite so open to the idea



Lead game designer Dugas says that, despite its boosted gunplay and action cutaways, *Deus Ex 3* is far from 'dumbed down', but truer to the principles of tactical choice espoused by the first game than *Invisible War*

technology, motivating underhand attempts to rule the market," says **Jean-François Dugas**, the lead game designer. "Corporations are likely to be attacked and blackmailed, so your role is to protect the interests of the company you work for. It starts very intimately: at the beginning of the game there's a big event that seems just to be targeted at your company, but propels you into a huge conspiracy."

"We wanted to explore the era in which mechanically augmented people first started to emerge"

Setting the third game before the events of *Deus Ex* is, the developers say, a logical choice given how the various possible endings of the sequel, *Deus Ex: Invisible War*, seemed so absolute. Establishing a global consciousness or a totalitarian religious state doesn't leave much in the way of wiggle room.

"Another thing was that we wanted to ground the game in an era the player would be more familiar with," says Dugas. "*Invisible War* was very sci-fi – maybe too much. We wanted to explore the era when mechanically augmented people first started to emerge."

But doesn't this pose a problem? *Deus Ex* was defined by the ability to choose from a number of paths, ultimately leading society in wholly different directions – won't such a possibility be limited in a setting where its future has already been defined?

"We can do big events," argues Dugas. "It doesn't mean that they will be toned down, but it does mean that things will have an outcome that fits with *Deus Ex*. *Invisible War* started with a fusion of the previous game's multiple endings. I think for us it will be a bit similar. We'll have different endings – but they will all make sense to players of *Deus Ex*.

"Choice and consequence are at the heart of what we wanted to create. Obviously, being an action-RPG there's more than one aspect to the game, but choice and consequence informs all of them. You can play the game entirely through combat or stealth – or a mixture – and supporting roles such as hacking and social skills will be used to open up more possibilities and alternate solutions to problems. So that's the low-level gameplay, but to an extent that's the real RPG aspect of the game. We want the players to be able to play the way they want."

Dialogue has a new system, making use of advancements in character animation to better signpost the reaction NPCs have to the player's dialogue choices. "You really have to read between the lines of what people are saying," says Dugas. "The way characters behave, crossing their arms or the way they answer back, will tell you how comfortable they are



The Montreal team is critical of *Invisible War*'s empty shell of a protagonist. "You didn't know who you were or what you were doing," says Dugas. "In *Deus Ex 3* we wanted to make a strong character"



Deus Ex 3 sports a more caricatured character design to better facilitate the physical dialogue system. "We wanted to focus on the emotions and expressions," explains Dugas





with you. There are augmentations that'll help you read the characters better and help you to direct your choices."

Dugas is less forthcoming, however, on how radically player choice will alter the direction of your game beyond multiple endings. Although the preceding games did ultimately take you to the same locations, your path through them felt significantly altered based on decisions and allegiances as much as skills and kit – we'd hope for the same, if not much more, from a game of this generation.

"Going with a branching storyline would be very complicated and expensive and the game would ship ten years from now," says Dugas of the team's modest, and perhaps judicious, levels of ambition. "However, something that we wanted to fix from *Invisible War* was the way your final choices weren't affected by any of the previous decisions in the game. We have some ideas that we're still exploring – but we're looking at integrating earlier choices to impact the way things play out."

Purists may also be alarmed to hear about the changes to the combat, now going for a straightforward approach to aiming, unimpeded by the statistically represented competencies of your character.

"The shooting aspect of *Deus Ex* was very weak in my opinion," says Dugas. "If you were precise it wasn't necessarily because you were a good player, but because your stats were boosted."

While you may think that being a good player might entail deciding which stats to boost, Dugas does make a fair point regarding the degree with which this frustrated your intentions: we remember quite a few galling instances when JC Denton, a trained anti-terrorism agent and burgeoning superhuman, would miss at near point-blank range thanks to an overt deference to the numbers. Nonetheless, Dugas says that the ability to hone your play-style remains in the ability to upgrade the guns, and yourself, through augmentations, supporting the moment-to-moment decisions between combat, stealth, hacking or social.

"In the first game, the augmentations were a bunch of stat-boosters. They'd make you stronger perhaps, but not much would change on the screen – it was subtle and not very rewarding. That's something we wanted to change a bit. Obviously there will be augmentations that are cerebral and less spectacular – but we'll have a lot of physical augmentations that will allow you to pull off tricks that no ordinary human could. For those sequences we'll switch contextually to a thirdperson camera view so you'll see clearly what your character is able to achieve."

In keeping with this increased blockbuster bent, Eidos Montreal is adding boss fights and creating a greater variation in pace, citing *Deus Ex* as 'kind of slow'.



"There weren't enough exciting, memorable moments," says Dugas. "It was aimed more towards a simulation rather than a game experience." Of course, *Deus Ex* fans may argue that the game's avoidance of bombast was a good reason to like it, and as with any much-loved franchise there will be griping about the right of a new team to take it in a new direction. However, such complaints forget that *Deus Ex*'s original lead designers, Harvey Smith and Warren Spector, were widely accused of dumbing down the game's design for *Invisible War* – an allegation that Dugas is adamant doesn't apply to the team at Eidos.

"They tried to console-ise it, but their way of doing this was to drop a lot of stuff and cut out a lot of the tactical management aspects of the first game," he says. "At this point we don't know exactly which platforms we're going to be out on. The PC, we'll be there for sure. But for us, console-isation isn't about dumbing down features; if we're to go console we will want to keep the complexity alive. We want the menu interface and controller to feel simple to use without risking any of their potential."

The team at Eidos Montreal certainly knows the previous games well, and has a healthily critical attitude to them; far from being sacrilegious, reassessing the value of such a hallowed title provides an essential perspective that might otherwise be stymied in nostalgia. And if we are to take anything from *Deus Ex*'s tale of cyborg ascendancy, it's that you have to adapt to survive.





"*Deus Ex* felt epic," says Dugas of its environment design. "The sequel felt a bit more contrived and claustrophobic. We're going to have a mix of those huge exteriors with more confined interiors – corporate compounds that you'll have to infiltrate and so on"



BULLET HELL

THE JAPANESE SHOOTER IS UNDER ATTACK – AGAIN. BUT THIS IS ONE GENRE THAT IS REFUSING TO GO OUT WITH A WHIMPER...

Normally, Sega's GIGO Center in Ikebukuro, north west of Tokyo, is just a really big arcade. Earlier this year, however, it hosted the 3 Big Shooting Festa and became the war room for a tiny section of the Japanese game industry. The enemy? The current ideological trend of 'making games for the west'. The symbol for this doomed revolution? A lone, pixellated spaceship.

Recent years have seen a huge number of shooter remakes, plus repackaging and some toe-dipping into the possibilities of download services, from an increasingly embattled group of small specialist developers. The 3 Big Shooting Festa served to illustrate that the genre still has its own big names and, more importantly, ongoing releases. Though largely down to a coincidence of delays and scheduling, the event celebrated the release of three additions to some classic series: the *Fantasy Zone Complete Collection* and *Thunder Force VI* on PS2, plus *Raiden IV* on Xbox 360.

Like any niche, shooters have a

Illustrations: **Army Of Trolls**

SHOOTER 101

The three shooter series that inspired the GIGO gathering have a rich heritage in Japanese gaming circles



THUNDER FORCE

A scrolling shooter released in 1983 for the Sharp X1 home computer, the original *Thunder Force* was rather crude compared to its sequels: the port of *Thunder Force II* to the Mega Drive in 1989, followed over the next few years by the third and fourth instalments, saw the series gain the reputation it now enjoys. The fifth game was one of the earliest Saturn titles to show off the machine's capabilities for complex scrolling 2D effects, though it wasn't well received by fans – hence the popularity of the decision to return to basics with the sixth game for PS2.



FANTASY ZONE

Released in 1985, *Fantasy Zone* may be the predecessor to the good-natured humour and self-referentiality of *Parodius*, or it may just be too bizarre to label at all. A blaze of colour, odd enemies and the charismatic Opa-opa spaceship combined with toned-down *Defender*-esque scrolling and objectives makes this one of Sega's oddest and most distinctive arcade franchises.



RAIDEN

Seibu Kaihatsu's best-known work, the first *Raiden* was released in 1990 and was a hit thanks mainly to the large numbers of enemies in each wave, and a feature whereby clearing the game awarded a fat bonus before restarting on a higher difficulty. The ability for players to show off by controlling two ships in multiplayer mode no doubt helped its purist appeal.

fanatical coterie of fans that obsess over the details, and it's this passion that saw well over 200 people cramming onto the fourth floor of GIGO to listen to each title's developers talk. This floor is usually reserved for Banpresto's *Senjo No Kizuna*, the Gundam game that places you in a closed 'POD' cabinet, but to celebrate the occasion Sega had installed a line of freeplay cabinets featuring the best of *Thunder Force*, *Raiden* and *Fantasy Zone*, as well as some other local favourites.

The talks had an enthusiast bent, as developers explained in turn why they worked within a genre that has never really found a place on the international gaming stage. This was perhaps best seen when the team behind *Fantasy Zone Complete Collection* talked about how they've spent two years porting a series of old arcade games to PS2, drawing a firm and absolutely precise distinction between 'true ports' and 'emulation.' Okunari Yosuke, the producer from Sega, and Horii Naoki, CEO of developer M2, gave a fascinating insight into their (and presumably the community's) sense of what's important when paying tribute.

The arcade original ran on the System 16 board, many levels less powerful than the PS2 hardware. Therefore, the games could have been 'ported' very easily using emulation software. Instead, the team redrew each sprite and its animation, making them identical to the original, and even managed to recreate its exact framerate – a marked contrast to the graphically 'improved' version released for PS2 in 2003.

M2 is a tiny company, composed of industry veterans, that specialises in remakes and ports, and Naoki painted a surprising picture of how a team can become fragmented as different staff decide to work on different sections of the project, emphasising that developing or remaking 'classic' shooters is not cheap or easy. In this context, the understanding that these types of games will always be expected to retail at ¥2,500 (£13 – *Fantasy Zone Complete Collection* is part of the Sega Ages 2500 series, named after the price) was clearly contentious: he ended by joking that the series should be renamed Sega Ages 6500.

"THERE IS STILL A LOT OF INNOVATION POSSIBLE IN THE GENRE. VETERAN TEAMS LIKE OURSELVES STILL HAVE LOTS OF IDEAS AND A LOVE OF MAKING ARCADE SHOOTERS"

Simple economics was also on the mind of Komazawa Toshinobu, the CEO of Moss Ltd and producer of *Raiden IV*. Released in Japan in 2007, *Raiden IV* uses the powerful Taito Type X board, which precluded a PlayStation 2 version. Toshinobu's insights are particularly interesting, because he left Seibu Kaihatsu (the original developer of *Raiden* and still the licence holder) when it began to decline as a maker of arcade games, and established Moss Ltd simply to continue the series under licence. This is a man who has literally set up a company to keep a shooter series he loves alive, but that doesn't mean he's unrealistic. The choice to develop the game for Xbox 360, a conversion in which extra modes and bonuses would be expected as standard, necessitated several home truths as a starting point: the potential market for the game would be very small, and the game would therefore have to appeal to as many people as possible within its niche, and it would not be cheap for consumers. This is even the case for games made for the likes of a Naomi board – they simply couldn't retail for less than ¥5,000 (£26). The fact that it's slightly more labour – and time – intensive to port to PS3 means that the only realistic option is Xbox 360.

When the game in question is neither a port nor a remake, however, the hardware issues are clearer. The choice to develop *Thunder Force VI* for PS2 was motivated by a number of factors: the number of units in Japan, its technical capabilities, and the simple fact that it's impossible to invest a lot of money in a new shooting game. The list of technical, labour and time considerations means PS2 is seen by these developers as the most affordable 'package' platform. The option of digital distribution with WiiWare and Xbox Live Arcade exists, but this sector has its problems – most of all, the prevalent notion that 'download means cheap' which, as the developers point out, could only be true if the scale of the undertaking was reduced. Given that these projects are labours of love, compromising the original vision would be out of the question, so companies have to deliver something that is worth buying in stores at a standard price, and tempting the small but hungry audience of shooting game fans with bonuses and quality production values on all aspects, from the packaging to the visuals.

The gathered audience sat politely through such a realistic series of talks, but there was a real glimpse of how deep their passion runs when, at the conclusion of the *Thunder Force VI* talk, Sega revealed that if all goes well this will be the first step of the STG Project, aimed at reviving some of the famous franchises in the genre. STG got its name because this was the standard designation for shooting games in what is generally considered to be the golden age of 8- and 16bit systems – and it's hoped the name will imply revival rather than simply retro fan-service.

The event ended on a high with a slideshow from **Toshiaki Fujino** of Triangle Service, talking about some of the games that have influenced the *Raiden* and *Thunder Force* series, and

being a little humorously reverential, given the presence of several of the teams responsible for the Mega Drive *Thunder Force* games. The talk ranged into the fundamentals of shooter design, how to create pacing through enemy movement and the placement of power-ups and other objects. This rather charmingly segued into a promotional spot for Triangle's *Exzeal* (a 'regular' shooter) and *Shooting Love 200X* for Xbox 360, which is a collection of minigames based around the core principles of the shooting genre. This is intended as a parody of what Fujino called the 'maniac trend' in some modern shooters, and he illustrated the point by saying that where a previous *Shooting Love* game had a minigame with 15 tanks to shoot, the 360 version will offer up to ten times more. He ended by applauding Sega for its central role in the modern shooter scene, thanks to the simple fact that its network sells and operates most of the games.

Though it was on a much smaller scale



than your average gaming event, it was easy to forget just how difficult survival is in the marketplace for these games. Surrounded by like-minded shooter fans, freeplay arcade machines and passionate developers, the most weighty discussions afterwards concerned hitboxes and the obligatory 'best ever' lists. After his good-natured spot of preaching to the converted, however, Fujino was a little more circumspect when asked if the genre was undergoing some kind of revival: "It's very risky to release an original shooter, so companies use series that have had some past success. I see that as looking backward and not really as a revival."

Taking a wider perspective is sobering. At JAMMA a few days previously, for example, shooting games were almost absent from the show floor: G.rev showed *Senko No Rondo Duo*, the sequel to its arcade and 360 mech-dueller, alongside some amateur productions. Even Cave, the developer famous for popularising the 'bullet hell' subgenre and one of the most staunch supporters of arcade shooters, had a tiny presence with only a video of its upcoming *Death Smiles: Mega Black Label* (which isn't a new game but an upgraded edition of *Death Smiles* with a new character). And that was it, leading to many doom and gloom predictions about the end of the genre in arcades.

Talking to **Hiroyuki Maruyama**, CEO and producer at G.rev, only added to the bleak outlook. G.rev is a small developer based in Yokohama that has worked on countless big shooters with other companies, as well as releasing titles under its own name, and its core team mostly consists of the people who made Taito's greatest arcade shooters such as *Darius* and *Ray Storm*. When asked about the apparent revival that shooting games seem to be enjoying, Maruyama insists that this is "more coincidence than a real sudden improvement" in a genre that is struggling more than ever. He goes further, saying: "Most shooter developers are at a point where they have to ask if there is still a point to making these games, particularly for arcades." This could be expanded to a more general point about whether consoles are becoming the only survival option for arcade developers.

"Making an arcade shooter costs a lot of money and few operators are really ready to invest in such games," says Maruyama. And in terms of the arcade boards available: "The Naomi still has potential because it's the cheapest system on the market, and personally I'd still like to make a couple of games on it." Sega has been wondering for some time now about replacing this cheap board, as its top-of-the-range Lindbergh board is financially out of reach for independent arcade developers – which has seen many Naomi developers graduate to Taito's Type X2. Even that, however, still represents an investment. "There is still a lot of innovation possible in the genre," insists Maruyama. "Veteran teams like ourselves still have lots of ideas and a love of making arcade shooters." At the same time, G.rev may be forced into new genres in order to survive. Maruyama begins talking about a network shooter idea that has gained support. He can't reveal the title since it's being released not by G.rev but "a famous publisher, using a legendary franchise."

More sobering talk comes as we move on to the prevalence of arcade shooters on Xbox 360 and XBLA, and a rhetorical challenge is issued by Maruyama: "Which platform do you want those games to be developed for?" He ascribes the current situation to there being no other option: arcade developers simply cannot afford to buy PS3 development kits and spend their time trying to understand the machine's intricacies. And, of course, the games being ported are developed on boards much more powerful than PS2. Fujino agrees, saying: "Microsoft certainly didn't oppose a small company like Triangle Service developing for them, but they weren't especially more helpful than other platform holders. The important thing, compared to the PlayStation 2 era, is that the machine is far, far easier to develop on. I really think it's a great platform from the developer perspective."

The most controversial point Maruyama makes, however, is that XBLA is far from being a "new and big chance" for small developers, and in fact often forces retail release. Microsoft is alleged to be very selective, though this opinion perhaps has something to do with G.rev's *Under Defeat* having been waiting for Microsoft's approval for a considerable time. But the opinion is supported by Fujino: "From the time development is complete to your game going on sale online, it takes about half a year – for developers like us this just isn't a financially viable business model." Both Maruyama and Fujino feel that small Japanese arcade developers have to fight to get a place on the release schedule between all of the big names that get priority. "Instead of waiting for the game to be released on XBLA," says Murayama, "it is often quicker and financially more viable to go for a retail release." This has the added benefit of addressing a bone of contention we're becoming familiar with: the problem of the game's pricing. "People simply associate 'download' with 'cheap,'" says Maruyama. "I understand somewhat, as I'm reluctant to pay 800 points for certain things. But the fact remains that a package release lets us ask a standard price."

The general focus on simple economics that is common to all of the shooter developers we spoke to makes an obvious point. Too often, it's written that the Japanese shooter scene is 'vibrant' without any context about the realities in which these games are produced. It's easy to look at a market that in the last year has played host to games like *Dodonpachi Dai-Fukkatsu* in the arcade and *Bangai-O Spirits* on DS, will shortly see three titles released through retail a week or so apart (as well as the likes of *Star Soldier R* and Konami's recent announcement of *Gradius Rebirth* on download services) and simply say that it's in rude health. Superficially, that list says it is. Beneath the surface it's a niche genre that is being kept alive by enthusiastic developers trying new business strategies, and publishers like Sega that are trying to reinvigorate their heritages. It's by no means a dying breed, and a successful shooter isn't mission impossible. But you get the feeling that flying into the future, even with these experienced hands on board, will take more than a few credits.



SMART BOMB

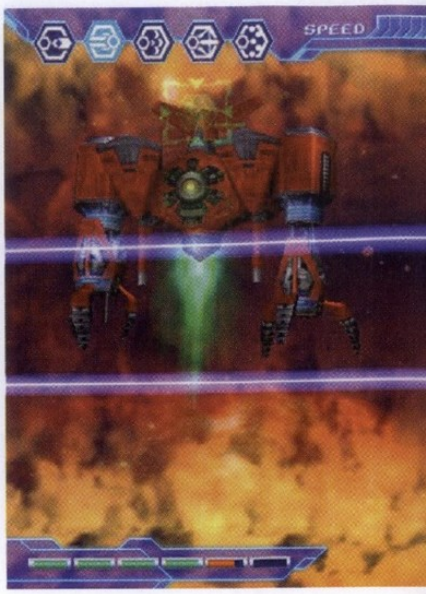
WE SPEAK TO SEGA'S TEZ OKANO ABOUT THUNDER FORCE VI, SURVIVING AGAINST THE ODDS, AND HIS PLAN TO GIVE SHOOTERS AN EXTRA LIFE

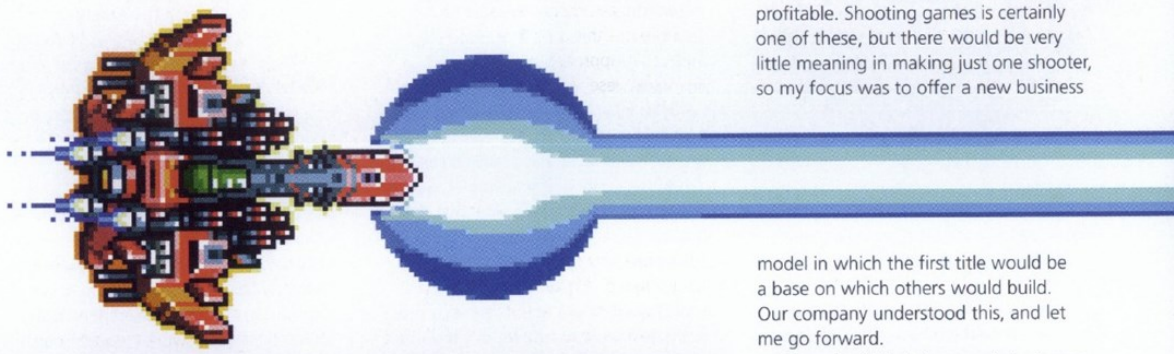
Tez Okano (left) has some experience of cult classics: he's the director behind the likes of *SGGG*, *Astro Boy Omega Force* and *Gunstar Super Heroes*. But at Sega HQ, in the aptly named Ohta-ku, south of Tokyo, he's talking about a new business model – one that might keep a failing genre alive and, if Okano has his way, one that might see a few more classics revived. We sat down with the director of *Thunder Force VI* to discuss aiming for the core.

Why have you chosen to develop an arcade-style shooter, especially given how the genre is struggling? And how did you persuade Sega to do it? Well, it's quite simple. I'm a man from the arcade and I really love this genre. I've wanted to make it for some time now. Shooters are a special genre, even in the arcade. They're not something you can really make big profits from, so they're often seen as a sign of prosperity. I mean, only companies that are profitable can enjoy themselves developing an arcade shooter. I wanted to see if you could develop this kind of game profitably – try a new business model, if you like.

You want to know a secret? There's no such thing as a *Thunder Force VI* project. The real one is STG Project. It is our attempt to revive a genre, with *Thunder Force VI* being the first step. Developing a single shooting game would not be profitable, so this is a first step which will be used as a base for future steps, and using names that fans will get very excited about. So Sega won't judge this project on *Thunder Force VI* alone but in the context of what we're trying to achieve.

Obviously, they were concerned about the business aspect. It's quite normal for people managing a company like Sega to be very careful about being profitable! But I made the case that, in today's worldwide videogame market, there are very few genres left for Japanese game makers. It is pointless for us to try making an FPS for the west, and overseas users are not very interested in Japanese RPGs either. We are left with very few genres in which we can develop, release and be profitable. Shooting games is certainly one of these, but there would be very little meaning in making just one shooter, so my focus was to offer a new business model in which the first title would be a base on which others would build. Our company understood this, and let me go forward.





Now, I said that the people in charge of managing this company are very anxious to be profitable. But at the same time, these people know about games too. When I put my idea on the table I realised they also loved shooting games, so during the meeting we spoke about





Thunder Force VI **has countless homage moments for fans of the genre, and some bosses will be familiar – though all have been reworked into the shiny robot aesthetic**











money but also about all those past glorious arcade shooters. They particularly loved *Tatsujin*! So by adding all these elements together, I got the green light for my project. I believe that it's because this is Sega, which has such a long history in the arcade, that I was able to get my project approved. If it was a company entirely focused on profitability, there would have been little chance of a shooting game being developed.

So why *Thunder Force VI* specifically?
Well, this is one game I really wanted to make. At the end of *SGGG*, you have a shooting sequence which is a tribute to this series. Now, try to imagine how Sega could ever revive a genre with its own licences. Should we have done *Crying? Whip Rush*? Come on! Of course it had to be a name as legendary as *Thunder Force*! I plan to include traditional features of past shooters like the Sound Select mode. There will be some slowdown as well!

You've assembled a specific team for this: did you ever consider going with one of the bigger studios like G.rev or even Treasure?
I have lots of good experience working with Treasure. I think in total we've worked on three projects. Treasure is an incredible company when it comes to the arcade, and especially shooters, but I felt that *Thunder Force* would have become a Treasure game and not a *Thunder Force*. If you look at *Gradius V* on the PS2, it is a Treasure game. So I preferred a team that would leave the soul of *Thunder Force* intact, and I wanted a very basic shooting experience like you would have enjoyed during the arcade golden age. I think Treasure has this unique artistic and innovative approach which was not in line with these requirements.

What are you specifically referring to by 'leave the soul intact'?
Well, I wanted a different approach from Irem's *R-Type Final*, where they decided to change everything. I preferred to go back to the roots. I want to deliver a *Thunder Force* for players who enjoyed it on the Mega Drive: I think that 3D altered, if not killed entirely, the fun of an arcade shooter by including these dynamic camera angles. And more and more shooters based themselves on character designs. What I wanted was that basic arcade shooting experience. So I'm making one! Most of the shooters you find today on the Xbox 360 or the PS2 are titles you don't really feel excited to play at home. You really need to concentrate and focus on your play in order to get into the action. Back in the day, when I was enjoying playing arcade shooters at home, I would be very excited to buy one. When I got back home after work I would open a can of beer and it would be instantly fun. Today, the games are too complicated, they need too much focus. When making *Thunder Force VI* I wanted that excitement back. No need to wonder about anything, just shoot, defeat the enemy waves and bosses, and get the reward of achieving victory! No weird character designs or sophisticated systems. Just pure shooting fun.

"NO NEED TO WONDER ABOUT ANYTHING, JUST SHOOT, DEFEAT THE ENEMY WAVES AND BOSSES, AND GET THE REWARD OF ACHIEVING VICTORY! PURE SHOOTING FUN"

What has been the most difficult aspect of this project so far?
Well, I don't want to talk too much about that but... well... money! There's no way I can get much funding for developing an arcade shooter today. It reminds me of *SGGG*. I had to be very careful with the budget we had, and try to be very creative in the way we worked during that year of development. But



Despite what screens may suggest, *Thunder Force VI* eschews cluttered 3D effects in favour of keeping the playing field clear for all those lovely bullets

TITLE: **THUNDER FORCE VI**
FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **OCT 30 (JPN), TBC (UK, US)**

TEZ OKANO'S FIVE FAVOURITE SHOOTERS



SALAMANDER

"I was a high school student when this came out, and it came as a shock to me in the arcade. The idea of an organic world that was in the game was so unique. There was nothing like it anywhere else, even in movies or manga, so it had a really profound impact on me. It illustrates the superiority of games at that time in being able to transport us to places that no other media could have."



CHORENSHA

"This is a game I spent a lot of time on and gave me lots of fun. It's a very minor title that was developed by amateurs on the X68000 computer – you can find it really easily online. It's not ruled by arcade business models so the game does not need to actually actively try to defeat the player. There is some kind of rule in the arcade which is to defeat the player in three minutes. If we don't do so, the game won't be profitable and won't find a place in arcades. *Chorensha* experimented with what a shooting game would be like without this rule. One play would last something like a dozen minutes – if it lasted more, players would feel bored, less and they would feel angry. It works!"



TATSUJIN

"This simply features one of the best game balances in the genre, without doubt. It stands between the very simplistic – perhaps too simplistic – *Xevious* and the really too manic *Dodonpachi*. I love it so much I bought the original arcade board."



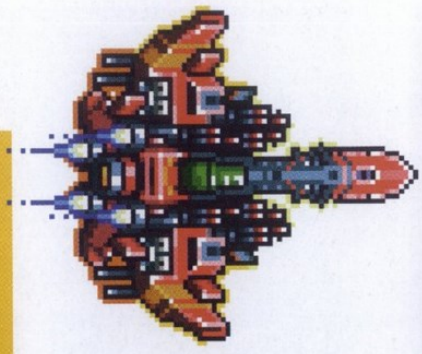
SPACE HARRIER

"I suppose I'm cheating a bit with a 3D game, but like *Salamander* it transported you to a totally new and original world. I remember that when I was younger, I spent all the money you traditionally get at new year, Otoshidama, in the *Space Harrier* cabinet, no less than ¥5,000! I normally like to make a distinction between 2D and 3D shooters, but *Space Harrier* goes beyond such classification."



DARIUS

"This is a hell of shooter which featured three big screens horizontally! Can you imagine that – the space you had to fight your way through? It had another incredible world with such strange names. Sea Food! Body Sonic! This title may just mark the peak of the genre during those golden years of arcade gaming. It also really shows that shooters were the coolest genre in the arcade at that time!"





the other difficult aspect of this project is quality. When you have a series like *Thunder Force* which has not been developed for more than ten years, it reaches the status of legend. People reminisce about it, talking about all those great moments, sequences, bosses... *Thunder Force VI* offers all this, but it is hard to get the approval of fans who recall those features in different ways. But this is a game for PS2, not for Xbox 360, so it won't look pretty compared to a title like *Omega 5*. But we are talking about the Xbox 360 in Japan here, the console is not selling much, and so it is not the platform people would think of developing their arcade shooter on.

Did you consider an arcade version?
That was something I wanted to do, but in our arcade board line-up you have the Lindbergh or the Naomi, nothing in between. The Lindbergh is too expensive, and the Naomi doesn't have sufficient power, I'm afraid. If we'd had something in the middle, I would of course have insisted on an arcade version!

You've said that there are fewer options for Japanese game-makers to develop their creativity on the world stage. Why do you think that?
Let's consider the Japanese animation industry. It became what it is today because at one point in time it had very limited options for survival, which forced them to change, rethink, evolve and become the very successful industry we know today. That animation industry started as a copy of Walt Disney. After about 15 years it reached a limit because only Japanese people would buy those animations, and there was little point in investing the same amount of money for something that would sell only in Japan. I mean, in comparison there were better forms of investment, but the demand was still important so this made the studios rethink their approach. Some decided to focus on character design, others on developing original techniques and so on... Now consider the game industry in Japan. It is actually quite similar. In the past, our games were selling all around the world, titles like *Super Mario Bros* or

"MOST DEVELOPERS WHO USED TO MAKE SHOOTERS STRANGLED THEMSELVES GRADUALLY BY GOING TOO COMPLICATED, BECOMING TOO MANIAC-ORIENTED"

Why do you think the arcade shooter genre is struggling so much nowadays and selling so little?
The reason is very simple, and similar to the situation with fighting games. They became too manic. There is no way you can enjoy those games as they are done today. I see people ready to buy *Rhythm Tengoku Gold* on DS but very few that would go for *Dodonpachi*. We are very far from the time people wouldn't hesitate to buy and enjoy something like *Star Fox*. Most developers who used to make arcade shooters strangled themselves gradually by going too complicated, becoming too maniac-oriented. Many people enjoyed *Street Fighter II* but less and less enjoyed *Street Fighter Alpha* or *Street Fighter III*.





Despite Xbox 360's increasing fortunes, PS2 remains the platform of choice for small Japanese developers. Only low cost, good hardware capabilities and a large installed base can sustain niche games like *Thunder Force VI*











The influence *TFVI* takes from Okano's favourite shooters (see opposite) is obvious, from the organic levels with their bodily defences to the quick weapon-skip ability



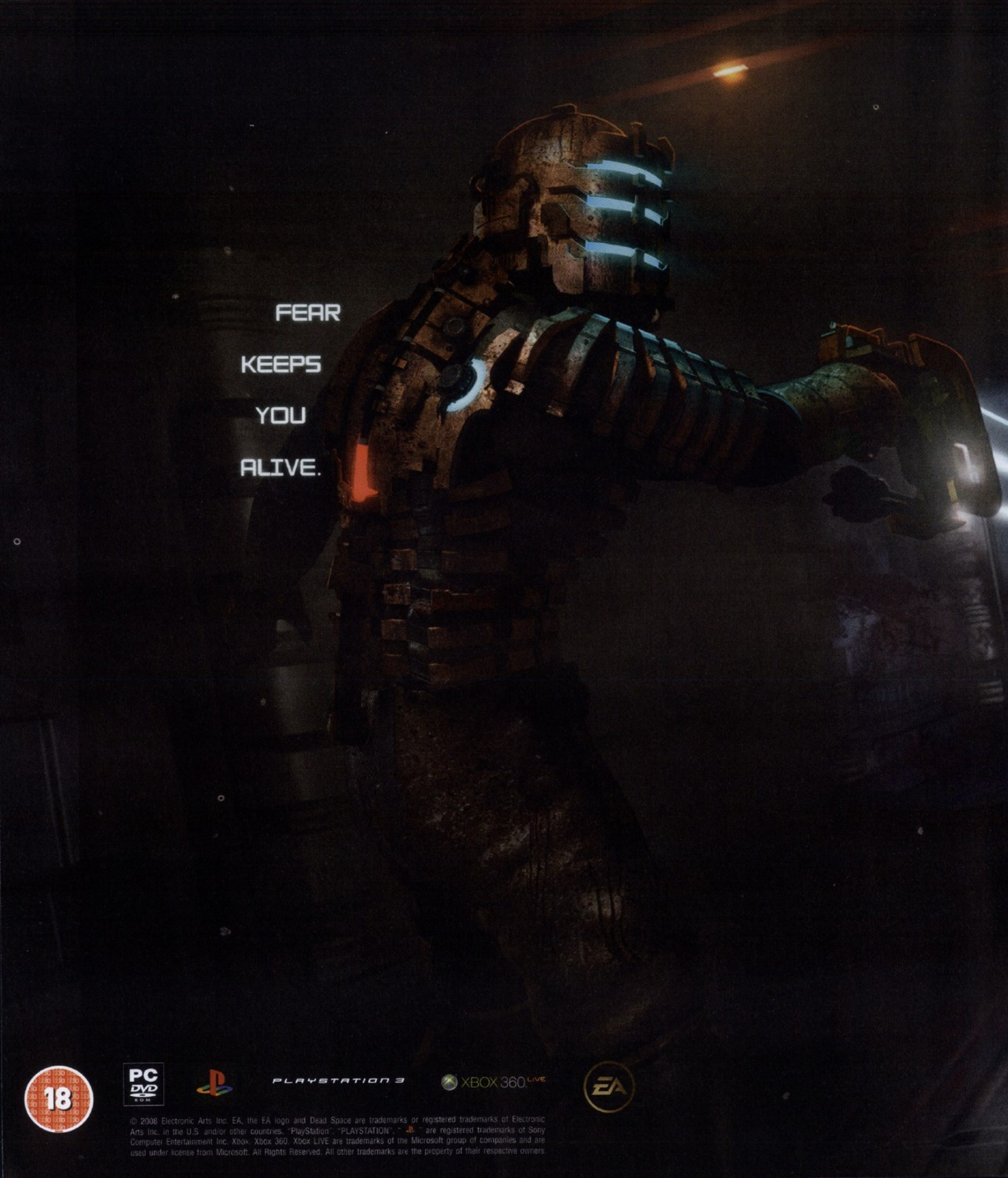


Biohazard. But, as time passed, those games could be made by someone other than a Japanese developer, and they could be made cheaper, or the western input would make those games fit the overseas markets better. Those specific areas of Japanese creativity faded and we were left with fewer opportunities to shine. However, I do believe only the Japanese can deliver a great arcade shooter. Take the way we used to only show planes flat from the side in our shooting games – no changes in perspective or showing the other wing. It might seem weird now but I think that's a visual idea that only Japanese developers could have come up with. From an overseas perspective it may have looked like nonsense but, for us, it looks cool!

Today's industry is very focused on the North American market. Do you feel pressure to make games that sell overseas? How does a project like *Thunder Force VI* fit into the current market environment?
We do have pressure. But let's be frank, overseas developers are best suited to make the content that overseas users will enjoy the most. In that sense, what we like to develop in Japan has to aim first at a domestic audience. I do understand the necessity in trying to target the worldwide market but, from a content point of view, it's nonsense. To be honest, I feel a bit tired now when I'm told or I hear: "Let's make games for the west". Of course you feel happy when your game is a worldwide hit. However, I don't think that should be your prime goal. We should be focused on our creative process first and deliver a title that is enjoyable.

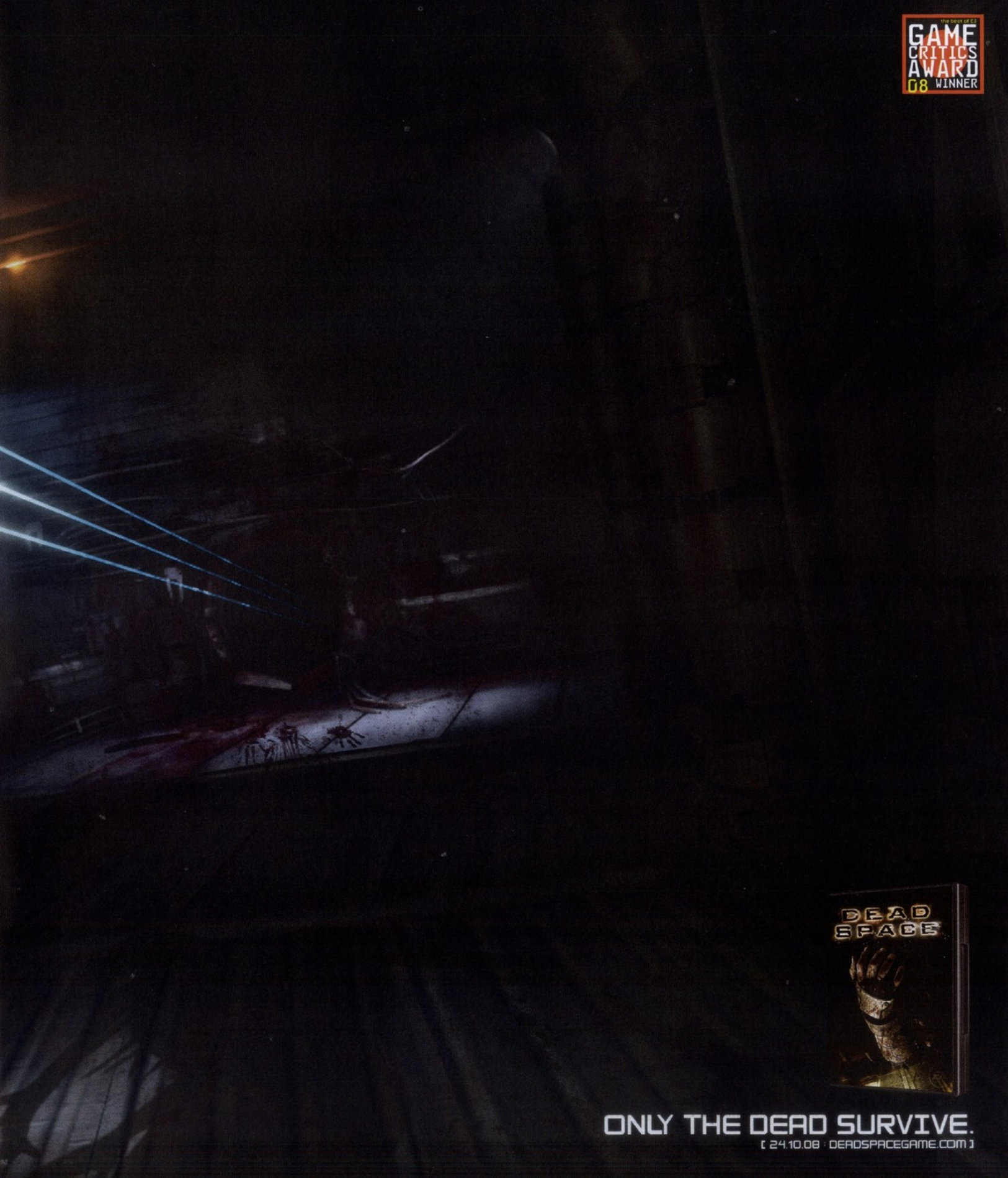
Will *Thunder Force VI* be released overseas, and if so, how?
I would like to see how download distribution could work for us. But in that case we have to find a balance with the pricing. On another hand, we could very well shift this title to the PSP. But it is unclear how much that performs if you take *Monster Hunter Portable* out of the equation here in Japan. It reminds me of the Wii a bit. I'm not sure our game would have much impact on those platforms even if they meet lots of success. So after we release the game on the PS2, the next platform we could try is certainly download distribution. Of course, should *Thunder Force VI* do well in Japan, I would be very happy to go with the Xbox 360 for the overseas market. No problem at all. But in Japan, it is all about PS2.

If *Thunder Force VI* is the first step of STG Project, what are the next ones?
Well, there are two dormant Sega licences which I would love to work on, *Space Harrier 4D* and *Fantasy Zone 3*. Should our first step be a success, I really would like to get some big studios and resources on those. But *Thunder Force VI* is a very decisive step, so others can come after. I need to demonstrate that our approach is viable. But for my next step, I'd really like to work on *Space Harrier*. This is a unique game in Sega's history that projected us into some incredible worlds and experiences. But the success of *Thunder Force VI* is the key to any future projects.



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From left: Andy Emery, Mick Morris and Stuart Aitken

OUTSOURCE UNLEASHED

THREE UNSUNG INDUSTRY HEROES DISCUSS THE FINER POINTS OF MODERN-DAY VIDEOGAME PRODUCTION

They play key roles in the look, feel and sound of some of the world's biggest games, employ some of the most skilled artists and technicians within the dev community, and work alongside the industry's best in-house teams – and yet they rarely receive credit from consumers. They are the specialists' specialists, independent companies whose services are used by the likes of Konami, Codemasters and Electronic Arts in order to deliver motion-capture, scriptwriting, voice-acting, CG sequences, and more besides. Welcome to the world of the outsource agency.

Thanks to the growth in scale of today's big-budget productions, the outsourcer's skills have rarely been in more demand. Here, we gather representatives from three of the UK's leading dedicated agencies – **Andy Emery** (creative director, Side), **Stuart Aitken** (managing director and technical director, Axis Animation) and **Mick Morris** (managing director, Audiomotion Studios) – to get their independent take on the progress of the industry today, and their unique places within it.

Let's begin with game scripting. We know that it's improved, but do you think it's still some distance from where it needs to be?
Andy Emery: It has improved hugely. The evidence is how much attention people are paying to it, and how early publishers and developers are now willing to get us involved in a project. Tagging on a story at the end of a game is – or used to be – such a common situation, and it limits so much of what you can do. People are now aware that if you give it a little bit of attention it can generate a huge extra level of engagement in your game.

Do you think we're heading towards a future in which story is actually the most important consideration within a game?
AE: No, I think it's part of a whole. It's a very important part, but it's an area that hasn't had proper attention in the past. I think people really haven't, on a massmarket scale, looked at it and said, "Hey, we can do something there." Certainly, some big titles have shown there's a way to do that, but I don't believe that's the be all and end all, at all.
Stuart Aitken: These days a lot of games have settled into quite distinct categories, and the fact that you've got some important story element can set your game apart from everybody else's.
AE: Even the smallest thing, like taking a character on a journey – it's the classic element of any film, but in so many games, at the end, the character is the same character as it was at the beginning. It's not an enormous issue, it just adds something else.

> "IF YOU GIVE SCRIPTING A LITTLE BIT OF ATTENTION IT CAN GENERATE A HUGE EXTRA LEVEL OF ENGAGEMENT"

Do you find that you have to 'sell' storytelling to developers, or are they coming to you?
AE: It's a combination of both. Sidelines, our writing side, is a new agency so it's all pretty fresh, but it was set up due to a clear demand, because what we've found over the past few years when we've had writers on our books was a case of: "Can you fix it?" Which is obviously better than not trying to fix it, but it's still not ideal, and that shift has occurred more towards that step not being at the very end of production. People are now saying: "We've got this idea, what can we do with it?" We've also had a few examples of developers and publishers coming to us with some environments, some tech and some scenarios, and saying, "What can we do around this? How can we make this work?" And that's a very exciting and progressive element.

Is it easier to invest effort into a project if you personally want to play the finished game?
AE: I get emotionally engaged in every project. I get annoyed and pissed off, and it's born out of frustration, because we always want to do our best and sometimes developers or publishers won't let you. I'm not talking about money, I'm not talking about budget – it's just if you step back for a second and listen to us, we've done this before with other people and we've hit that mistake, so we know how to make it better. A couple of times we've been heading down this road, going, "Stop!" But nobody listens. And you get frustrated by that. Then you find another project where they really want to engage with what you've learned, your services and what you can offer – they want to listen. And those projects are a joy to work on. That's where you want to be in your relationships with your clients, because otherwise you're always thinking, 'We could bring more to this, we could be better'. But they need to have a degree of faith and trust in us. It sounds rather corny but it's nice to feel like you're part of a team. And getting us on board works both ways – you're going to get a little lift both ways. The great example would be the *Fable II* team, who had a lot of faith in us and knew what we did – they didn't try to micro-manage. Now, there's a lot of dialogue in that game – if there were casting decisions to be made, or last-minute changes, unless it was something completely wrong, they trusted the direction we were taking it. And all the time they wanted our feedback on how things were going and what could change. It was a joy to work on.

Side also worked on the original *Fable*. What sort of things did you learn between the original game and the sequel?
AE: There's an interesting point that relates to an article in **Edge** [in issue 156, Graham Linehan criticised *Fable*'s voice-acting, particularly its failure to cast children as children]. One thing that we were determined to do – and obviously with *Fable II* it was a bigger title, with a bigger budget and a bigger cast – was use our own directors. One of the things we were determined to do was cast children as children, and within that time I've become a father. I've had the joy of watching animations like Charlie And Lola and the difference even in kids' animation where it's a child that's performing is astonishing. So we came to *Fable II* and there were characters who were children so we cast children. We had a specialist child director and really worked on getting it right.

At the time, did you think Graham Linehan's criticism was fair?
AE: It amused me more than anything. I think the thing is that in the original *Fable* we covered 200 characters with 20 actors, so I think they did a pretty good job under those limitations, but it hasn't got a chance of being serious if you're multitasking to that degree. The other interesting thing is it gives you a very different performance. It's also a sort of style decision – an animation actress doing a child's voice will give you more pizzazz and excitement and engagement, but then there's the child's quality that's intangible. So it's finding that balance of where the project sits, and we hit that all the time. Because the developer will want it 'gritty and real' – great, but they want to use ten actors for 25 characters. And then it's: "Could we make his voice sound a little bit different?" Yes, but he'll sound more cartoony. You'd never get that in a film – Matt Damon playing five roles or something like that.

Presumably you have a core of voice talent that you know can do certain things very well, and then others who have other qualities.
AE: Animation multi-voice actors are fantastic – we use them on *Everybody's Golf* and *Ape Escape* and that kind of thing, and also heavily on projects like *Fable II* – but they're not always the best people to give you the straight lead character. Then it's a combination, and now we try to ringfence the lead cast, and then we can look at a bunch of multi-character actors who can cover a multitude of others. The other thing is that people sound quite similar – so don't get scared if there's two villagers that sound a bit alike, because that would happen in real life. Accents aren't that extreme.
Mick Morris: We come up against similar issues, to some degree. People will happily spend tens of thousands on their motion-capture, but when it comes to talent they're like, "*How* much?" If we're doing a shoot, they might say, "Can't we get John from IT to play Andy McNab? Because he does paintball on a Sunday." Well, you could get John to play Andy McNab but when you see Andy McNab changing a clip and getting back into position next to John you see the difference. We hired a guy about 12 months ago who was Daniel Craig's stunt double for Casino Royale – he was absolutely fantastic but the response from the development side was: "Isn't he a bit too good for us?" And that's crazy! He can't be too good! It's all about the performance!
SA: I think that's changing a bit.
MM: Absolutely, but it's still a stumbling block.





AXIS ANIMATION
Axis is a Glasgow-based studio comprising producers, directors, designers, artists and animators, with a focus on providing CG animation for games, commercials, broadcast and film. The company has picked up numerous awards, including a Best Animation BAFTA and the Imagina Grand Jury Prize, and outside of gaming has produced work for companies including Renault and MTV.
Recent projects: *Operation Flashpoint 2: Dragon Rising* (below), *Crysis*, *Thrillville: Off the Rails*, *Race Driver: Grid*

AUDIOMOTION STUDIOS
Formed in 1997, Audiomotion is the UK's leading motion-capture specialist. With 6,000 square feet of production space, it has the largest in-house capture area in the country, and counts among its clients the likes of Guerrilla, Capcom and Realtime Worlds. In the movie world, it has recently worked on the likes of Prince Caspian and The Golden Compass.
Recent projects: *PES 2009* (below), *Operation Flashpoint 2: Dragon Rising*, *Top Spin 3*, *Don King Presents: Prizefighter*, *FIFA 2009*, *Harry Potter And The Order of The Phoenix*, *Race Driver: Grid*

SIDE
London-based Side has five main areas of expertise, providing writers, casting, directors, composers and production facilities to the videogame industry, and recently introduced Sidelines, a dedicated game writers agency. It also works outside of games, but in the last two years its output has risen from 50 per cent dedicated to interactive entertainment projects to 85 per cent.
Recent projects: *Tomb Raider: Underworld* (below), *Fable II*, *Age Of Conan: Hyborian Adventures*, *LittleBigPlanet*






I mean, quibbling over the cost of an actor for a day... It's all about that actor, it's all about that performance!

AE: Between the film industry model and the games industry model is that horrible term 'vertical slice'. People would love to make movies in a vertical slice way – the reason they don't is the creatives and the talent involved. You can shoot it over two years, but your actors aren't going to be available, the director isn't going to be available. We're looking to introduce higher-profile actors and directors to videogames but unless you can say, "This is a shoot period," a six-week slot, with a pickup at a later date, it just doesn't work. This happens all the time – the developer will say: "Can we have them back next weekend?" Well, no, they're doing a movie. "Can't we get them on contract?" No. *Heavenly Sword* bucked the trend in this respect because they went out to WETA and shot their cutscenes in two distinct chunks – they got their lead cast together for those two periods, and that worked.

MM: Clients are now changing the way they think about doing that kind of performance-capture work, but it's taken some doing to even get to that stage. It's difficult to get them to lock down scripts by that point. Design can't change – it's all got to be locked down by this five-day period.

AE: You're talking about a whole story for a game, which might be seven or eight big scenes, and maybe you could change some of the tiny things with just one character and do them outside of that at different times. But the one thing that hopefully people can look at doing is locking that main story arc and, God forbid, having the performer perform.

SA: There's another issue, though, which is that only recently has technology got to a level where you can have an actor acting and see a comparable convincing performance on your 3D character from that shoot. And I think performance-capture is the key term, because not only can you now get body movements but you can capture a convincing emotional performance from actors and have some chance of replicating that at the other end of your engine. And that's a real shift because previously no matter how good your art team were, the technology would always limit you in some way in terms of how emotive your character is. I think *Heavenly Sword* is a great example of something that realised that – they said: "Right, we're going to get the best people in the world." They got Andy Serkis, and went all the way with that. There's still a huge problem in terms of getting that character, and I'm not talking about making them look real in terms of the uncanny valley or anything, but it's still much simpler to make a 2D character involving than make a convincing 3D character. Even now, the amount of work you have to put in to get a good performance you can believe in is colossal. The move towards realism just makes it more and more and more difficult – the closer to reality, the harder it is.

MM: That's very true. We've always thought that full performance-capture was the holy grail. Full body-capture, fine; do the face later, fine – but now you can do the full performance-capture, that's the big thing. But we've got this far and there are very few studios that can do it. The technology is there – we can do it with up to five actors, and that's using face, fingers and full body. That's so useful – if you've got five actors in a scene with the eyelines right, and the full physical contact there...

AE: One of the key factors of that is being able to walk away with actual dialogue you can drop into the game, so you're not overdubbing later.

MM: Traditionally you'd do these at different moments in time: you'd have your actors act out the full-body motion-capture, facial animation at a different point in time with someone stitching that on, then the audio at a later point in time, then trying to make something convincing out of that. But now the technology's there and the pipeline is there, but it's still difficult to get that emotional element.

TECHNOLOGIES AND TERRITORIES

What about technologies such as Euphoria? Is that sort of procedurally generated animation a real threat to your motion-capture work?

"THEY MIGHT SAY, 'CAN'T WE GET JOHN FROM IT TO PLAY ANDY MCNAB? HE DOES PAINTBALL ON A SUNDAY'"

MM: We've always worked very closely with those guys – like us, they're based in Oxford. The two technologies work pretty well together. Their tech is very useful. Touching briefly on the Casino Royale stuntman again, there are some things you wouldn't or couldn't do with your stuntman that that stuff does quite nicely, but it doesn't give you acting, and it never will. I don't know if that's too bold a statement, but...

AE: It's kind of like the whole text-to-speech thing, and I know that might seem an obvious one, but there's a lot of money being pumped into trying to make that work. Text-to-speech, even if it got to some ultimate level, my response would be: "What about acting?" I mean, you can see huge advantages of text-to-speech with stuff like online games, but what about introducing emotions?

SA: My last company was Ananove, the virtual news reader, and that company went in that direction after that and totally towards virtual characters – they used what tech they had on the games side and went down that route, which is an interesting tangent, I think, but it's a long way off. I mean, I kind of agree with regards to Euphoria – that it's brilliant for what motion-capture can't do but it kind of sucks when you come to what motion-capture can do.

MM: At one point they were punting it as mo-cap on your desktop – you'd never have to visit a studio again. But that was just marketing and that claim didn't last very long. But we work very closely with them; we think they're complementary.

Do you think there's a type of outsourcing that is particularly suited to companies based in the UK?

SA: I'd like to answer that in a slightly different way. I think there's a type of outsourcing which is much easier to put further afield, and there's stuff you have to do closer to home. We use outsourcers for modelling and stuff because that doesn't really matter, as long as you've got a good line of communication and good references. And I think things like asset creation can be outsourced pretty much anywhere as long as you get good people. But I think there are issues involving creative input, where what you're doing isn't just producing an output, it's all the things that go into it: does this work? What's the script? That kind of thing. And I think the more it needs that kind of stuff, the bigger the advantage is with working with somewhere nearby. There is a cultural issue, as well – that the outsourcer understands your game. I think I speak for all three of us here when I say that we understand the games market, we understand our clients, and we understand what clients are trying to do. I think that's stuff you can't punt out to China or the Far East or wherever. We were quite worried about that at one point. India's opening up massively now, China, and a lot of the old Eastern Bloc countries are coming out and... They've got really good people, I'm not slagging them off at all, but...

There seemed to be a perception a while ago that work produced in those regions was a bit cheap and cheerful, but in terms of quality the bar's coming up, isn't it?

SA: It still is [cheap and cheerful], a bit, but that'll change rapidly. But what won't change is that need to interact with people at a slightly deeper level – even with *Heavenly Sword* they were working with a sort of similar cultural base in New Zealand, but something as simple as the time difference is a big issue, in terms of this really big disconnect.

AE: I think there's a line where the convenience factor outweighs possible budgetary or even dare I say creative issues. We work on projects where they have the option to work in LA or London, and say it's a predominantly US cast – if there's a small European team working on it that wants to be involved on a number of occasions, and it's relatively small US cast, then they might make the choice to do that in London, and that outweighs going out to LA. But alternatively, if your project is very street and it features a lot of ethnic characters, then don't even start to try it [with UK talent], unless it's a cartoon game. So there are elements that dictate where you have to do certain things closer to home or not.

Do you think international clients might think of it the other way round: "Oh, we've got to work with those Brits again"?
SA: I think the clients actually put quite a lot of onus on being close to home – so we've probably won and lost a few jobs based on where we are geographically. In some sense the industry is still slightly naïve in that way – if you go to big manufacturing, it's totally global, but in games the trust thing is still there. It's like: "We're closer to these guys so we can work together better."
AE: In terms of US clients we've picked up some surprising ones because they want it to be British – there is a lot of respect for British actors in the US, more so than I'd probably imagined. And the wonderful thing about a lot of games is they have a period setting where US English doesn't really work. Things like *Age Of Conan*, or *Dragon Quest VIII* a few years ago, they'd always worked in the US on their titles and then they went British. And clearly *Fable* is very British.

So, if there is this certain respect for British actors, do you think there's any similar sort of respect for British companies like yours?
SA: I suspect I'm too close to that to answer it. I think there are cultural differences in how you work with and interact with people, but I probably couldn't tell you what they were.
AE: We find a very pronounced difference in straight recording sessions – in the UK a director will come in and direct the performance they want, and if it's not right they'll ask for an alternative. In the US the culture is: "Give me three takes, then I'll go and find the one I want." And we find that quite a clash in terms of explaining it to our actors, or to US actors if there's a British director. There was one example where a US client requested all the outtakes – they said, "Oh, we're going to use them for something," and we said, "Well, you can't have them because they were wrong…"

It's interesting to see that developers are becoming more keen to show how their games are made games nowadays. *Drake's Fortune*, for example, has quite a large section dedicated to behind-the-scenes sessions.
SA: There's a lot more of that now, and it's the same as the 'making of' bits on DVDs. It gives developers a bit of exposure as well, because games are a bit of a faceless medium in a sense. People put all this work in and, bar the credits, this maybe gives them a bit of: "We did this." We at Axis never get on them, of course – we don't want people to notice our work!
AE: We're doing a lot of 'making of' filming now.

MM: When you have film clients in asking about games, they say, "Tell me about games," because they genuinely have no idea. They know it's eclipsed their industry, but they don't know the numbers of people that go into it, or the length of time. *Grand Theft Auto IV* eclipsed anything they've done, and maybe before that they looked down their noses at games a tiny bit.

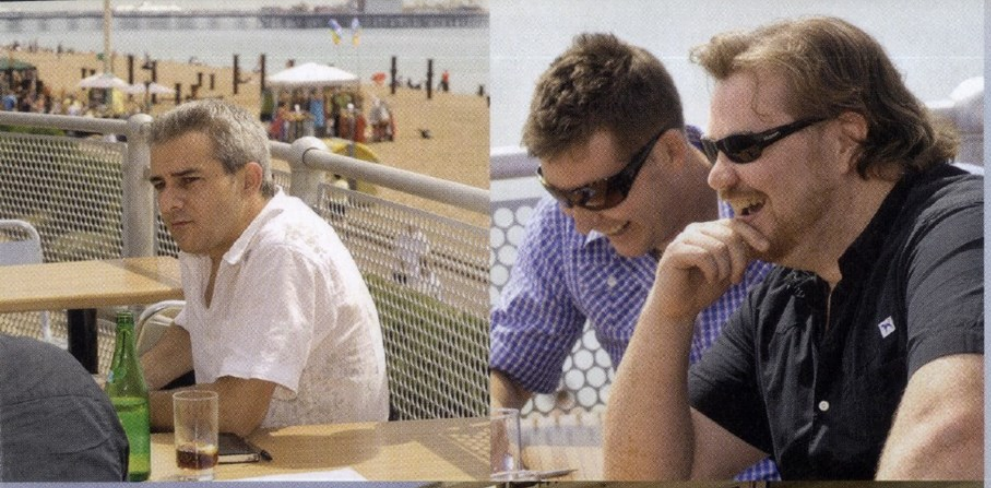
THE VIDEOGAME HORIZON

What are your thoughts in terms of where the videogame market's going and what you're preparing to be working on in the future?
SA: For us, maybe a worrying shift away from the big, big-budget epic titles, towards the more casual games like *Buzz*.
MM: Is that actually taking resources away from the more hardcore games, though? I mean, obviously Nintendo's leading that whole casual gaming thing, but I always wonder if that's an addition, or are resources going into that that could be used elsewhere?
AE: I think there's been a slight reallocation of resources, definitely. We see it as an opportunity we didn't expect, because it's already occurred. Sidelines has provided writers for quite a few casual titles now, and even a few boardgames – because of the proliferation of quiz titles, for example, we've got two specialist quiz writers now. And things like an interactive cooking guide – ultimately that's actually got a lot of voice prompts and dialogue in it. It's a different type of work.
SA: Not much in the way of blockbuster CG, though. It's obviously something that affects us. We tend to cater towards the triple-A end in terms of budgets, and we depend on a lot of development being homogenised under the likes of EA, Microsoft and Sony. It makes the business relationships easier – if it's more fragmented it's much harder to keep on top of who's going to give you the work. The model the industry uses at the moment ultimately means that there are budgets for us to do what we do; if it was smaller scale I'm not sure that would be the case. Where I'd like to see it going is us widening what we do: producing the CG's one side, but we don't feel that's where our real strength is. And in terms of safeguarding our business we obviously offer all these less tangible but more important things that go with it that are part of the service anyway… There will be a time when the technology side of games and the technology side of CG will come together, and that will be an interesting time for people like us, where movie effects, TV effects and game effects all begin to meld together a little. Interestingly, we've pitched against people like The

"FOR US, MAYBE THERE'S A WORRYING SHIFT AWAY FROM BIG-BUDGET TITLES TOWARDS CASUAL GAMES LIKE BUZZ"









Mill, Ridley Scott's company, a couple of times and – without naming any names – you fall off your seat laughing sometimes. The difference between what these companies think is a budget and what we do – it's just orders of magnitude.

As British companies, you're obviously aware of the Games Up initiative. What do you think of the opportunities it may bring about?

MM: I think it deserves everybody's support, no doubt – the recent closures of the likes of Pivotal and Venom bring that home. I mean, in one sense these things are cyclical, and new companies will always spring up, but everyone should support it. I happen to live in David Cameron's constituency and I've written to him and invited him to look around the studio and see what's on his doorstep.

I think the problem faced by Games Up and the industry as a whole is changing Joe Public's perception of what we do – the millions we contribute every year to the economy, the money for doctors and nurses and everything. The press aren't interested in that – they're interested in the guy who got stabbed near a queue for *GTAIV*. They've got to change that public perception before anything else.

SA: There's a massive disparity between the support given to us and the film and broadcast industries – there's a huge infrastructure there in terms of agencies supporting people in film. The institutional side of things doesn't have a clue how you do that for gaming – and I'm not saying I do either, by the way – the sense that you can make a low-budget movie, but how can you make a low-budget game?

AE: I think, also, that people have only just realised that the UK is a leader, and has been for about 20 years, and we could either grab the end of that opportunity now or let it go.

MM: The problem is we are going the wrong way. The UK was leading, but we've dropped to fourth place now [worldwide]. Last year we were third. We're dropping slowly. I think the industry needs government support – and it's not a begging bowl, we just need a level playing field with the likes of France and Canada. But it will still be some time before we have a prime minister who actually plays and understands games, and I worry it will be too late before that actually happens. Idiots like Keith Vaz running around… he is who people listen to, and he's an idiot – a typical example of not letting the facts get in the way of a good story.

SA: The perception of the high-profile guys is kind of: "Oh, I started a company when I was 20, here I am in my Porsche…" And you've either got this kind of perception of a geek in their bedroom or a kind of flash objectionable young upstart. The reality is that there are those people, but it's a huge spread…

MM: There are something like 10,000 people employed in this industry in the UK but the press aren't interested in that. There was an interesting story involving Gareth Edmonson at Reflections, who recently said to local government up there: "I want to create another 600 jobs in Newcastle – will you help me do that?" But it fell on deaf ears.



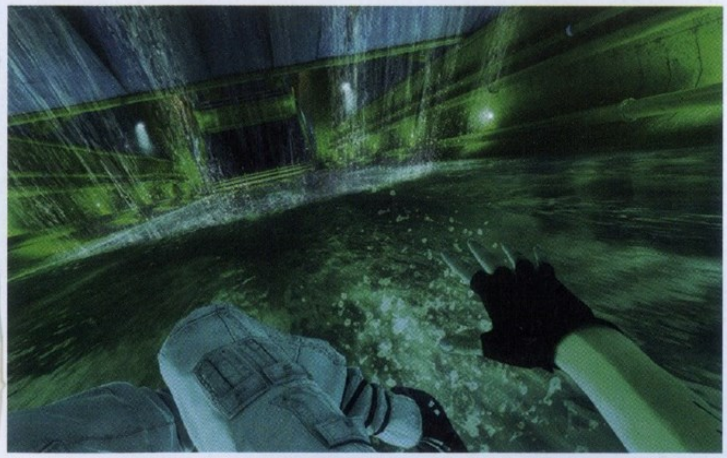
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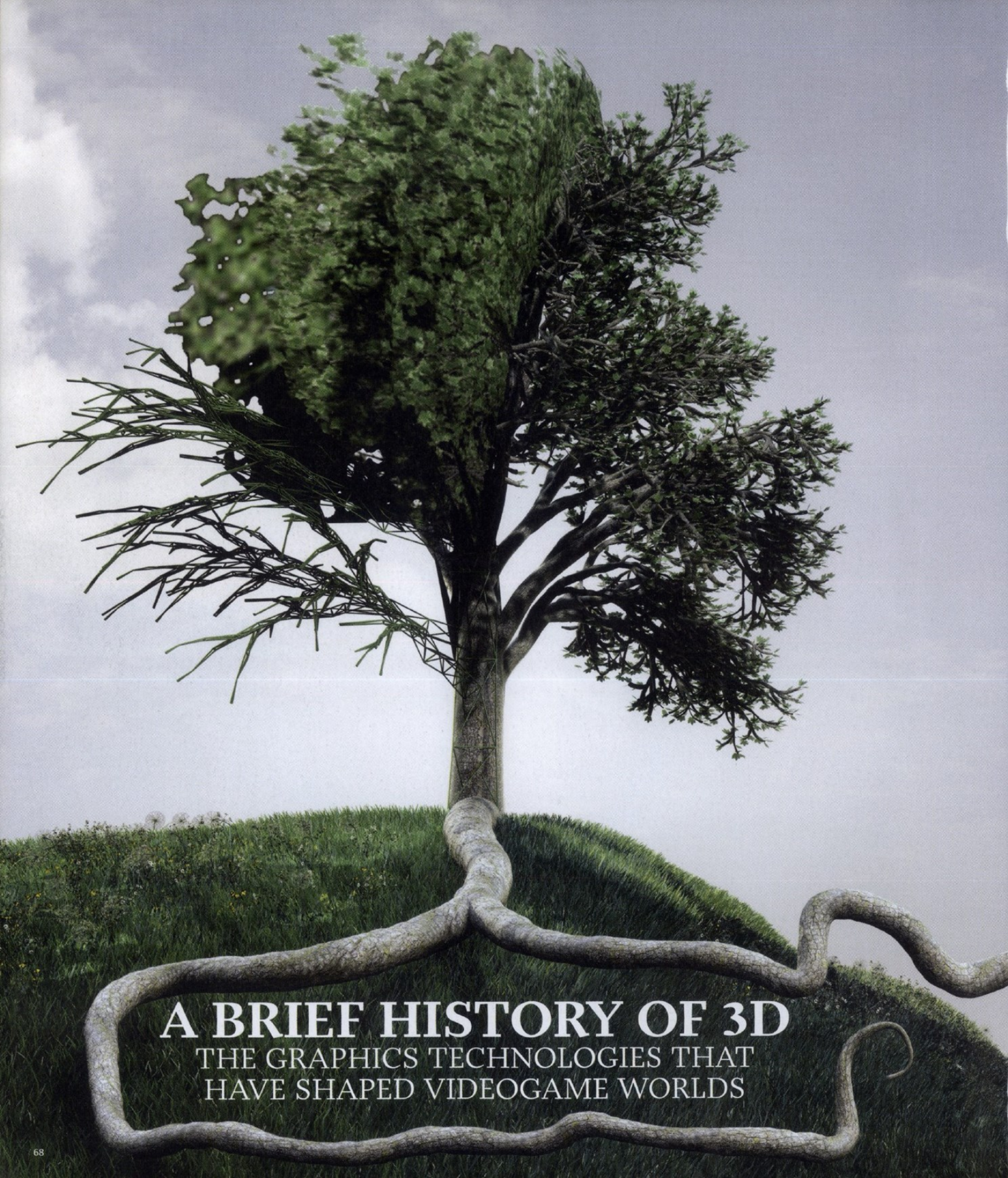
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A BRIEF HISTORY OF 3D

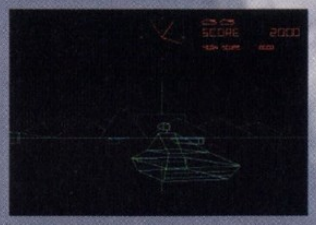
THE GRAPHICS TECHNOLOGIES THAT HAVE SHAPED VIDEOGAME WORLDS

2D VECTOR GRAPHICS

Almost everyone who studied trigonometry at school knows the basic mathematics needed to represent and manipulate geometric shapes drawn on a sheet of paper or TV screen. Each shape is represented by a series of points, with the position of each described by two numbers: its horizontal, or X, location and its vertical, or Y, location. In mathematics these are known as 2D vectors. Shapes are then made by connecting vectors together. This is how *Spacewar!*, the very first truly realtime interactive videogame, worked. Created by Steve Russell and two friends studying together at MIT in 1961, *SpaceWar!* ran on a DEC PDP-1 and a vector beam display. The display worked somewhat like an oscilloscope, with the PDP sending a series of vectors together with beam on/off instructions to paint the lines and shapes on the screen for each frame.



DEFINITION: A vector is a point in space defined as the distance from the origin along each axis.



WIREFRAME 3D

If 2D vector graphics are represented with two numbers for each point on a plane, 3D requires three, with the extra numeral representing depth (the Z location). The mathematics to manipulate and to project them on to a 2D plane have been understood for centuries so, in some ways, 3D games were inevitable once computer hardware became powerful enough to manipulate and display enough 3D points to represent a game world. Released in 1980, Atari's *Battlezone* was the first truly 3D videogame. It used a similar vector beam display to that of *Spacewar!* and, indeed, Atari's own *Asteroids*, to show tanks and the battlefield as simple vector outlines. After all, the hardware, even though it featured a custom math co-processor, could only handle a handful of points each frame.

The 3D we see rendered on our TVs and monitors is a lie. Complex meshes of secrets, lies and workarounds that create from the nothing of mathematics the something of space. After all, computers haven't yet a chance of simulating proper optics and worlds as intricate as our own. Instead, realtime 3D graphics have developed, year by year, into a portfolio of techniques and effects that are designed to emulate the real world. And now they're finally beginning to approach that holy grail – if you squint hard enough – the quality of photography.

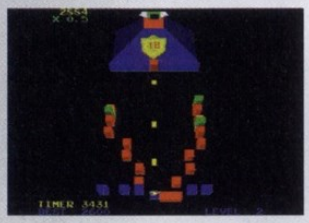
The processes behind 3D graphics are abstract, demanding a daunting new lexicon of terminology to fully understand. But the inspirations behind them are thoroughly rooted in reality. Programmers have carefully studied the subtle play of sunrays around shadow, the delicate shine on worn tarmac or the way water shimmers as it refracts light to translate them into code that works on the hardware of the time. It's these incremental developments that have, step by step, animated and articulated 3D gameworlds from those of *Elite* in 1984 to *Far Cry 2*'s today.

Even now, however, the base principles that allowed Steve Russell to program a PDP-1 to draw the beautifully simple triangles of *Spacewar!*'s ships still lie at the core of realtime 3D, as does the influence of the way a cathode-ray television displays images. Our 3D graphics are made from a set of densely interconnected processes that have developed iteratively, and in parallel to each other. The following pages detail the techniques that spearheaded the development of 3D graphics and the way they have affected games themselves, from perfect white vectors to textured surfaces, smooth shading to shimmering light and shadow.

Illustration: Simon Danaher

FILLED POLYGONS

While many early wireframe games used vector beam displays, the cathode-ray tube was far more common among displays until LCD and plasma technology came along. CRT displays are raster-based, the image being made up of rows of thousands or millions of coloured pixels. Rendering, or rasterising, polygons on such displays is a process in which the image is 'painted', pixel by pixel, as the display scans each pixel on every line of the screen from left to right, top to bottom. By computing the edges of each polygon in each scan line, they can be painted with colour in order for them to appear solid. This is still used today in the core of GPU rasterisers and is part of the family of Bresenham line drawing algorithms, which determine how pixels can represent straight lines. Though its atypical game design prevented it from being a hit, Atari's *I, Robot*, released in 1983, is now considered the forefather of the modern 3D videogame, with its use of filled 3D polygons and camera controls.



GOURAUD SHADING

Though polygons are often employed to represent smoothly contoured shapes, they're let down by the fact that polygons are inherently angular. Gouraud shading is a technique that blends the gradients of colour making up their facets, visually softening them. In the process, each vertex that defines a polygon is given its own colour, with differences between adjacent vertices interpolated during rasterisation, so the shading changes smoothly across the polygon. It's a method often used alongside basic realtime lighting, which is calculated by computing the angle between the vector of a simple directional light and a polygon's 'surface normal' – that is, the direction its flat face is pointed. The angle is analogous to the amount of light falling on the polygon and shaded accordingly. If the surface normal values between adjacent polygons are averaged, however, you can, in effect, move the surface normals to being 'vertex normals', and therefore use Gouraud shading to make lit surfaces look smooth, a process used to great effect by *Star Wars: TIE Fighter*, released in 1994.



DEFINITION: In computer graphics, a vertex is a vector that has additional information attached to it – for instance, a colour, a surface normal, a texture coordinate or a combination thereof.



TEXTURE MAPPING

One of the main challenges in rendering 3D graphics is creating surface detail, because representing every little element as coloured, shaded polygons is computationally expensive. Texture mapping is therefore employed to simulate surface detail, a technique that's fundamentally important to 3D graphics. In its basic form, texture mapping is pasting an image on to a polygon. The process assigns the vertices in a polygon to specific pixels in a 2D image called a texture map. When the polygon is rasterised, the 2D texture coordinates are interpolated to find out which pixel in the texture map (the 'texel') matches each screen pixel to map the texture onto the surface of the polygon. Developers had attempted to use texture mapping since the birth of filled 3D polygons, but it wasn't until *Descent* was released in 1995 that the process showed its full potential, with a complete 3D environment of walls, floors and in-game objects rendered as fully textured polygons.



SCALED SPRITES

In order to match the visual detail and colour featured in 2D games in early 3D worlds, developers looked to sprites. In 2D games these small images would normally be rasterised at full scale on to the screen, but for 3D games they needed to be scaled depending on their distances from the viewpoint. In such systems the sprites representing gameworld objects are placed at vectors – as the image is rasterised, the pixels from the source image are copied multiple times to adjacent pixels or skipped in order to scale the sprite correctly, a process called linear interpolation. It's a technique made famous by Sega with games like 1985's *Space Harrier*, which ran on its now legendary System 16 arcade hardware. Ironically, modern GPUs actually emulate sprites using textured polygons aligned to square up to the camera's view angle, exactly what Sega was trying to simulate, such as the fronds of leaves on *Oblivion*'s trees, the 'sprites' in *Castle Crashers* or the smoke from skidding wheels in racers like *PGR*.

MIP MAPPING

Simple texture mapping with high-resolution textures inefficiently uses both memory and processing power, and tends to exhibit various problems with shimmering artefacts (see 'complex filtering'). MIP mapping solves both of these problems by storing a series of scaled-down versions of each texture map, with each successive map being half the size of its parent. When a texture is applied to a polygon, the rasteriser computes how far the pixel is to the camera. This defines which MIP map to use, though several MIP levels are typically used and interpolated between to get smooth transitions. MIP mapping predates the commercial use of GPUs, but the most notable examples occur after the GPU's introduction, such as Rage Software's shooter, *Incoming*. Released in 1998, its fast, smooth 3D was a showcase for GPU-enabled effects.





PHONG SHADING

One problem with Gouraud shading is that it's a screen space technique, which is to say that it's calculated in terms of the display screen, not the 3D world the screen is attempting to represent. The disparity between the 3D world and the screen means that such processes cause interpolation errors. For instance, a Gouraud-shaded set of polygons that represent a sphere would betray the polygons that form it. Algorithms such as Phong shading fix this problem by computing the lighting value for each pixel as the polygon is rasterised. It works on a similar basis to Gouraud shading, though in the final stage of the process Phong shading is different because it can modulate the light reflectance value to simulate different surfaces – plastic, for instance – with strong specular highlights, such as Ulala's shiny dress in Sega's *Space Channel 5*.

REALTIME LIGHTING

Realtime lighting actually comprises a complex series of different techniques, but in simplest terms can be represented by straightforward Gouraud or even flat shading. For gaming, however, this is clearly insufficient because, at the very minimum, we also want local point lights – light sources hanging in space that emit a specific colour, brightness and a rate at which the illumination dims as distance increases. This is achieved by extending lighting calculations (such as Phong) at the rasterisation stage to take multiple lighting directions and positions into account – though the final colour of each pixel is also affected by texturing and other surface effects, of course. Realtime lighting was used with spectacular results in id Software's *Quake*, released in 1996. Its gloomily atmospheric dungeons sported local point lights in the guise of wall-mounted torches as well as dynamically located sources such as rockets.





RAY CASTING

At the beginning of the 1990s, the PC had become powerful enough to allow developers to start thinking about rendering textured 3D worlds – providing they cut a few corners. Ray casting, a subset of the more complex ray tracing technique, renders a scene's background using vertical rather than horizontal scan lines. A ray, or a straight line of sight, is traced from the centre of each scan line on the screen back into the 3D scene. The first object or wall it hits indicates its position and distance away from the camera, and if the world is made of walls or blocks of a uniform height, such as those in *Wolfenstein 3D*, they can therefore be textured in a similar way to *Space Harrier*'s sprites. Things get more complex if the environments aren't of uniform height, but it's simply a case of extending the ray intersection tests, which is exactly what John Carmack did with *Doom*, which was released in 1993.



Z-BUFFERING

One of the biggest problems with rendering 3D is calculating which polygons should appear in front of one another, and correctly displaying them. You could sort the polygons into depth order and render those farthest into the screen first, but what happens when two polygons intersect each other? This is where Z-buffering comes in. Here, the frame buffer not only stores the colour value for each pixel but also the depth of that pixel into the screen, a calculation that takes place as each polygon is rasterised. The Z-buffer starts off being set to the farthest depth from the screen. When rendered, every pixel's depth is compared to that already stored in the buffer – if it's closer to the screen then the new pixel depth values are stored. If not, the new values are thrown away because they are obscured behind the existing pixel in the rendered scene. While this technique had been in use for some years, it was the geometrical complexity of worlds such as those of *Super Mario 64* that showed how Z-buffering could remove some of the compromises and restrictions to which games had been subject.

DEFINITION: An area of memory that holds the image to be displayed on the screen. Typically this is divided into two – the frame being rendered and the one being displayed. The frame buffer normally holds more information than just the image: an alpha channel, stencil and depth (the Z-buffer) are normally all stored together.

ENVIRONMENT MAPPING

Gran Turismo's replays weren't only notable for their dramatic framing of the race, or the fidelity with which its cars rode the track. It was also the shine of bodywork reflecting the environment around the vehicles and emphasising their form and movement. There are many ways to represent environment maps, but the most commonly used is that of a cube map. Imagine standing on the spot and taking six photos of the space around you: to the front, sides, back, top and bottom. An object can then be textured as if it were placed at the centre of this 'cube' by projecting rays out from its surface normals out into the 'cube' to gain a reflection of the virtual environment. The maths can be greatly simplified to allow static reflections to be computed cheaply, a deficiency that isn't actually that noticeable, especially on a racetrack like that of *Gran Turismo*, where most of the reflection comprises road, crash barrier and sky.





COMPLEX FILTERING

One of the problems with texture mapping is aliasing, in which textures appear blocky when viewed close up, or swim and shimmer when reduced to less than their actual size. These effects are caused by the basic nature of 'nearest neighbour' filtering, which does not take into account the fact that it's unlikely that the centre of any texel can be placed precisely on the point that the mathematics says it should. Better results are achieved with more complex filtering techniques, which take into account the positions of neighbouring texels. Bilinear filtering uses a square of four texels to interpolate the colours required for each pixel. Trilinear filtering adds MIP map levels into this computation, while anisotropic takes surface orientation into account to improve detail in textures on surfaces oriented at oblique angles to the view plane. The broad, low resolution (by modern standards) textured vistas of *Flight Simulator 98* benefited strongly from such techniques, all performed with the invaluable help of the graphics card, whose wide availability was relatively new in 1997.

AMBIENT OCCLUSION

Realistic lighting and shadowing is a big challenge for 3D graphics. Consider a half-closed fist. If rendered with direct lighting, the palm would be lit as brightly as the back of the hand, and if shadowed, the palm would be in total shade. This does not happen in real life, because light bounces around, indirectly illuminating surfaces (see 'global illumination'), and objects cast shadows on themselves. Ambient occlusion is a crude but effective way of simulating the way light bounces around an object. Though computationally expensive, it's rarely computed in realtime – instead, the developer calculates it for each character, background or object as they're created, to be combined with realtime lighting when rendered. The process shoots a spray of rays out from each polygon in a hemisphere aligned to the surface normal. If a ray does not intersect with another polygon in the mesh, the surface is made lighter, so that, in effect, polygons surrounded by many other polygons will receive less ambient light. It greatly enhanced the character models in 2004's *Half-Life 2*, making them visually credible and lifelike to match the scripts they spoke and acted with.



REALTIME SHADOWS

Whether a game is 2D or 3D, shadows are invaluable for allowing players to judge relative distances between elements in the gameworld. While there are too many different methods to discuss here, one widely used in modern 3D games is shadow mapping. To create a sunlit scene, the game renders the environment from the perspective of the vector that defines the sun's direction and stores the depth information in the Z-buffer. This creates a shadow map that defines everything that's visible from the light source. When the player's view is rendered, the game can compare each pixel's position in 3D space to the map; areas in shadow can be rendered without the contribution from the light source. If the light moves, the shadow map must be updated, a process that creates moving realtime shadows. The most striking early use of the technique was in *Splinter Cell*, which incorporated shadows as a gameplay mechanic.





ANTI-ALIASING

While complex filtering can be considered to anti-alias textures, a different technique is required to remove 'jaggies' from the edges of polygons. The most common form is multi-sample anti-aliasing (MSAA) which is available in most modern GPUs and is done by taking 'samples' at slightly different positions inside each screen pixel (normally between two and 32 times) and averaging these to get a final pixel colour. As more samples are taken the fidelity of the result rises, but so does the computational cost. An 'adaptive anti-aliasing' technique can minimise sampling whilst maintaining quality by comparing samples as it makes them – if they differ greatly, sampling continues until the result becomes stable or a maximum number of samples is reached. Now a standard component of any 3D game for PC, many PC gamers' first experience of anti-aliasing came when playing *Tomb Raider* on a 3DFX card.



VOXEL RENDERING

Voxel (or 'volume-pixel') systems represent scenes using a series of cubes. While a 2D pixel image is analogous to a series of coloured dots on virtual graph paper, a 3D voxel image is the same but extended into the third dimension, so that space is divided up into a grid of tiny cubes that can be transparent (air) or opaquely coloured (matter). Full volume rendering systems are incredibly computationally expensive and are currently the preserve of medical imaging and scientific visualisation, but a subset of the technology enjoyed brief popularity in gaming during the 1990s with PC helicopter sim *Comanche Maximum Overkill*. To reduce the load, *Comanche* used a 2D height field image to represent terrain. In a system similar to *Doom*'s ray-casting, *Comanche* traced rays for each column of screen pixels, and then computed where these rays intersect with a height field to render a vertical scan line of voxels.

NORMAL MAPPING

While texture mapping can add detail to a surface, it can't do everything to lend it a sense of materiality, such as the subtle variations in lighting that are formed by bumps and divots. Normal mapping addresses this while avoiding the need to give objects greater polygon counts by adding a texture to the surface that holds a 'bump' image. One colour channel in the texture indicates the horizontal surface normal perturbation (its deviation from the normal) and another channel holds the vertical perturbation. This texture is then mapped on to a surface, but the two-channel perturbation is used to adjust the surface normal in the Phong or other lighting calculation. In effect, it simulates the lighting of bumps on the surface. Normal mapping is an extension of the older and simpler bump mapping technique, which has also been widely used in games. It was first used to powerful (though many would say too powerful) effect in *Doom 3* (see p100 for more on this game), which boasted high detail despite the game's relatively simplistic geometry.





PARALLAX MAPPING

The development of surface rendering techniques has gone hand in hand with a steady increase in the power of the GPU. Parallax mapping is one of these, an extension of normal mapping in that it gives an added illusion of depth to a surface. By using a spare colour channel in a normal map to store the height of bumps on the surface, the game can create a parallax effect within the texture, which is calculated by displacing the coordinates at which the texture is read when rendering each pixel according to the view angle and height map. So, as the angle between the polygon and the view increases, the parallax displacement also increases. There are problems with this approach: notably, the effect breaks down at very oblique angles. There are solutions to this, but they're expensive to compute. Some of the best examples of parallax mapping to date are the brilliantly chunky stone walls found in the cities of *Oblivion*.

DEFINITION: The visual effect whereby close objects appear to move faster than those far away to a moving viewer. In 2D games, it is commonly simulated by scrolling layers of background graphics at different speeds.



GLOBAL ILLUMINATION

Most lighting in computer games is created using a direct lighting model, in which surfaces are lit by direct sources and a preset 'ambient' light level. Ambient light doesn't exist in the real world, however. Instead, surfaces are indirectly illuminated by light bouncing off other surfaces, which affects both intensity and tone of the light. In 3D graphics, the light reflecting from surface to surface many times is impossible to compute in realtime at present, and won't be possible for a good while yet. So the idea of 'global illumination' right now is to compute light bounce values and hold them in textures that are taken into consideration for final colour values when rendering the scene in realtime. There are other techniques but, in effect, the results are currently very similar – static yet realistic lighting with some limited influence of realtime lighting. It can still create some spectacular results – witness the subtlety evident in the lighting of *Halo 3*.

IMPOSTORS AND GEOMETRY INSTANCING

With games increasingly attempting to show a far greater scale of action, such as large battles or bustling city scenes, the need to render large numbers of similar objects has become ever more significant. Two very different techniques can achieve this while avoiding some of the great processing cost. Geometry instancing uses a single carefully optimised model that can be manipulated purely by the GPU by 'instancing' it and changing just a few parameters, such as its location, to repeat it in the scene. By restricting the process to the GPU there's less need to move memory around and take up power from the CPU. The vividly named impostors procedure renders a single or series of models to textures, which are then displayed as scaled sprites in the game world. Because the sprites have been created with the very same parameters, such as lighting, they tend to fit into the scene naturally. This is how Rare created the troll battle sequences in 2005's *Kameo*.



PARAMETRIC SURFACES

A problem with representing 3D worlds with meshes of polygons is that of detail versus distance. If a single static mesh is used for each object, the computation in rendering its detail when viewing from afar would be wasteful, and not have enough detail if viewed from close by. This can be eliminated by storing multiple meshes and switching between them (see 'level of detail'), but in some instances it would be better to construct the mesh on the fly, adding or subtracting polygons as distance changes. Parametric surfaces can be used to achieve this by representing surfaces like the curved underside of an arch as mathematical formulae, from which the rendering engine generates meshes on the fly. Such curves can be represented by a spline and a specified width. *Quake III* used the technique in order to generate the complex organic forms that feature in some of its maps.



DEFINITION: In computer graphics, a spline refers to a curve in 3D space defined by a number of control points.

LEVEL OF DETAIL

As 3D worlds allow players more freedom to move around and explore, level of detail switching becomes crucial to maintain high levels of detail. Players would expect to see individual branches and fronds of foliage when close to a tree, but it's wasteful to use this model when the tree is at a distance. There are many ways to simplify distant geometry by culling detail, such as with impostors, tessellation of parametric surfaces, or switching in lower detail meshes – all parts of a level of detail system. An outstanding example of this is the forest rendering system in 2004's *Far Cry*, in which trees switched from high detail models to lower detail and eventually to sprites, while ground foliage was faded out and eventually turned off in the middle distance as Crytek made use of the fact that foliage in densely packed jungle obscures much of the ground cover further away. Employing LODs in this way was the only way Crytek could realise its vision on the available hardware, and it's one of the key features of many modern graphics engines.





POST PROCESSING

Some of the more arresting visual effects created by games in the last few years, such as bloom, depth of field and blur, are down to post processing. They're possible through the ability of a modern GPU to convert the frame buffer to a texture at any point during the rendering of a frame. This can then be used as an input in other rendering passes, converting the frame buffer to a texture multiple times. Depth of field is created by rendering as normal and capturing both the colour and Z-buffer to a texture. The colour texture is then blurred and composited back over the original, sharp frame buffer using the Z-buffer's depth value to define where it should be sharp and blurry. Most current-generation games make heavy use of post processing, but *Prince Of Persia: The Sands Of Time* stands out as one of the first games to rely on these techniques to create a highly distinctive visual identity.

HIGH DYNAMIC RANGE RENDERING

Another fundamental problem with game lighting is that of light intensity. The human eye has a contrast perception of about 1,000,000:1, but the best plasma TVs offer only a contrast ratio of about 10,000:1. Put another way, at best, a TV's brightness is only 1000 lux, compared to a clear day, which can be 20,000 lux. What's more, computers render images using just 256 levels of intensity each for red, green and blue – hardly wide enough to simulate the likes of sunlight streaming in through a church window. HDR attempts to fix this by rendering the scene with many more light levels than the 256 the TV can display. It then 'tone maps' the value back down to 256 levels as a post processing step. Tone mapping simulates an iris contracting and expanding to alter the exposure of the image, so that the dark areas appear darker and the lighter ones relatively brighter than the original image. It's now a standard element of most games, but its benefits were demonstrated best in Valve's *Half-Life 2: Lost Coast* tech demo.




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Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Edge's most played

Bookworm Adventures



If the MOD could find some way of weaponising Scrabble it'd surely work like this – and we'd be Britain's first line of defence against the enchanted lion terror.
PC, POPCAP

Warhammer Online: Age Of Reckoning



Being called a git-face and getting aggro from dwarfs, visiting Da Slop and getting giants drunk. All in a day's work for our little Squig Herder. Review next month.
PC, EA, GOA

Mass Effect



The Normandy headed out of dock after nine months, and BioWare's epic opened its maw once more. It stuttered, it occasionally bored, but it held us for three immersive days.
360, PC, EA

LittleBigPlatform

What does being a 'platform' actually mean?



LittleBigPlanet's three tenets – play, create, share – mark its ambitions to be a platform. They were surely inspired by online innovations, but Media Molecule has ensured that play, or playful interaction, is at the centre of each one

Cliff Bleszinski recently claimed that *Gears Of War 2* was no longer a game but a platform. It's a buzzword that implies much, but Bleszinski's clarification was that its range of multiplayer options would be "a package that people will play for months, if not years, to come".

Longevity is a shallow reading of a word that was once only relevant to hardware. *Gears 2* will still be *Gears 2* in a year's time, its scope locked to the tight rules and laws Bleszinski and his team set when they coded it. It's easier to claim that *Halo 3* is a platform, with its comprehensive set of multiplayer options that come in the guise of Forge. Playing with Bungie's rules has allowed whole new gametypes for *Halo 3*, as awkwardly as they might fit into the strictures of an FPS, including Grifball and Rocket Race.

Far Cry 2's editing tools give far more freedom than Forge does, of course, moulding huge chunks of land with assets made for the main game. Whether players will be able to push their creations far beyond Ubisoft Montreal's distinct vision for *Far Cry 2* remains to be seen, but without the ability to insert player-made graphics, it seems unlikely to generate the same level of ownership that, for instance, turned *Doom* into a platform.

It's *LittleBigPlanet* that exemplifies the term, of course, and not just because of the genre from which it's formed. It's less a game than a set of tools for players to create their own games, and Media Molecule is committed to support it with downloadable extras for a long time yet, including new logic-based objects. It has already shown itself able to emulate shooters and *Tetris*, and perform impersonations of platformers like *Super Mario Bros* and *Sonic The Hedgehog*, but the breadth of its tools seems likely to leave such pastiches behind.

So what, then, is the definition of a platform? It's something fluid and mutable, able to change and adapt to the imaginations of the people who create for it. In so doing, a platform retains relevance far longer than simply what originally came stored on the disc. It's a different way of thinking about a game, and *LittleBigPlanet* is easily its most convincing manifestation. When we consider which of today's games we'll be playing in years to come, it surely has to qualify.



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96 **Sonic Chronicles: The Dark Brotherhood** DS
97 **Disgaea 3: Absence Of Justice** PS3
97 **Tales Of Vesperia** 360
98 **Legendary** 360, PC, PS3
98 **World Of Goo** PC, WII
99 **TrackMania DS** DS
99 **Line Rider 2: Unbound** DS

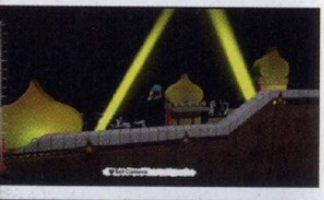
Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three, 4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven, 8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



LITTLEBIGPLANET

FORMAT: PS3 RELEASE: OCTOBER 24
PUBLISHER: SCEE DEVELOPER: MEDIA MOLECULE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E174, E186, E192



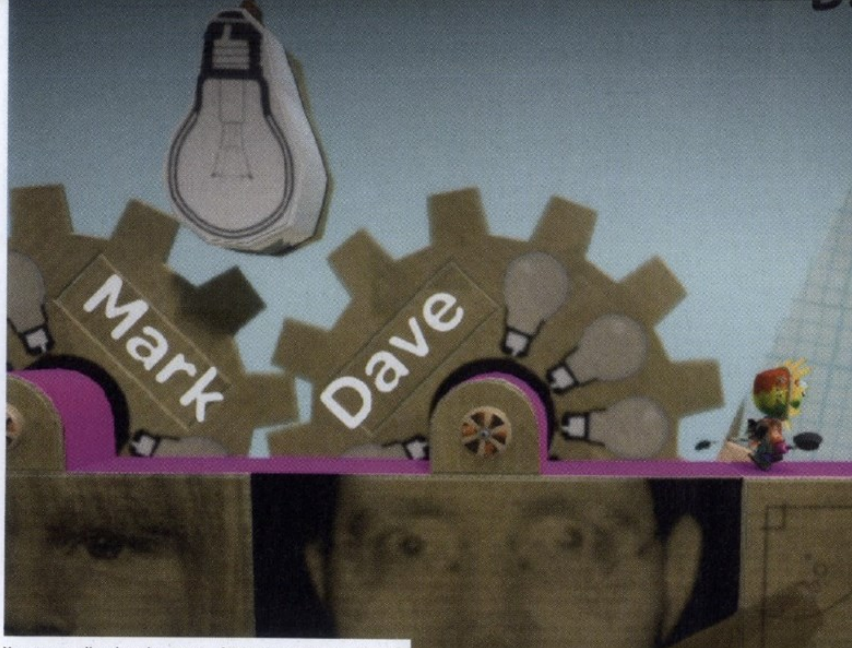




St Petersburg, 2048, where searchlights pivot at 90° with an offset of 45 – except the one that fell behind the scenery we can't be bothered to fish out. Popping objects between sizes and planes is as easy as switching between game and editor, making it easy to recreate, even enhance, the vibe of vintage platformers

For the first couple of hours in *LittleBigPlanet*, Stephen Fry's narration, a reprise of his role as the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, threatens to steal the show. If not that then Sackboy, an expressive dress-me-up doll whose arms and head you can move with sticks and tilt, and whose mood you control with the D-pad, will. So careful is the introduction to this overwhelming game, and so reliant is it on paternal, unpatronising presentation, that you wonder if anything is underneath. Later, you'll wonder if anything isn't. Then, at work, on the train or as you drift off to sleep, you'll wonder a little bit more. And by the time you wonder if the wondering will ever stop, you already know the answer.

By now, you'll have likened the game to many things. *Halo 3*'s Forge; every *Mario* rolled into one; STOS and AMOS, the seminal 16bit game-making kits; those Japanese assault course shows on Challenge TV; or an Oxford Street window display at Christmas. And what you'll notice is that for every game it resembles, it also resembles something real. Yes, *LittleBigPlanet* is a platform game, with a complete story mode of over 50 levels and minigames, all with scoreboards and support for online party play. And, yes, it's a construction set so sophisticated that it created every one of them. But above all, it's a world – one built with such incredible attention to detail that you half expect it to spill from the screen and across the floor.

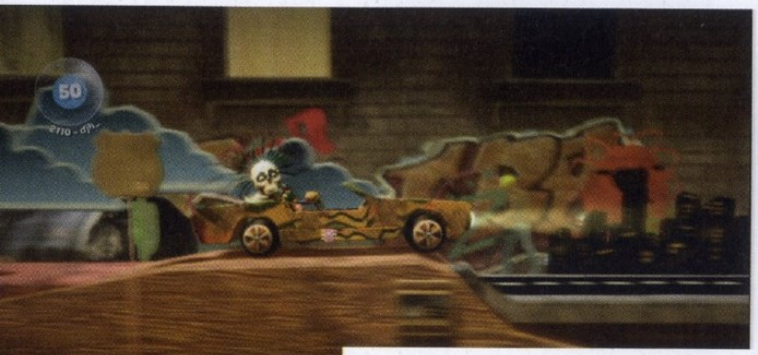


You soon realise the advantages of using large, finely sculpted objects rather than piles of smaller ones. The job of gluing and ungluing unnecessary pieces is as agonising as watching the whole thing collapse when you forget to stick it together

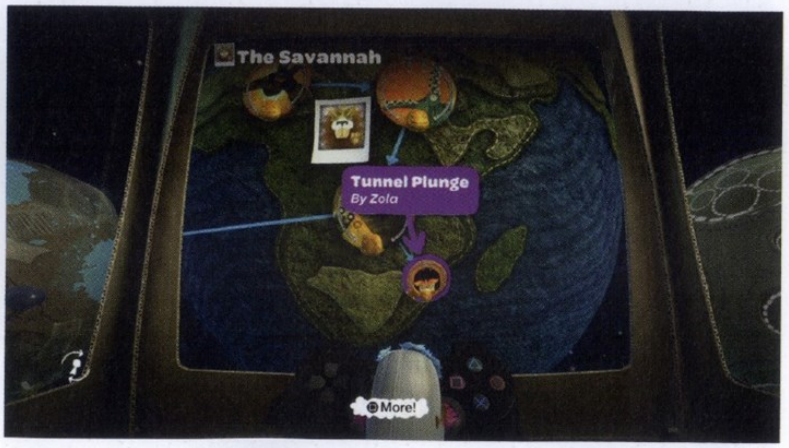
It's a world with widely reinforced physical rules, which to those expecting a PC-like editor will immediately seem like a compromise. Nothing could be farther from the truth. As you piece together a level out of various materials, colour it with stickers and use levers, switches, sensors and couplers to turn it into a game, the most you can do to suspend its physics is literally press pause. Only then can objects hover without being anchored, or be edited without their behaviour causing problems. Hit play and life in *LittleBigPlanet* resumes, anything not glued or propped in place tumbling as gravity decrees. Furthermore, the game occurs on three planes in '2.5D' – if something in the background falls behind the foreground, you have to move the obstruction to select and retrieve it.

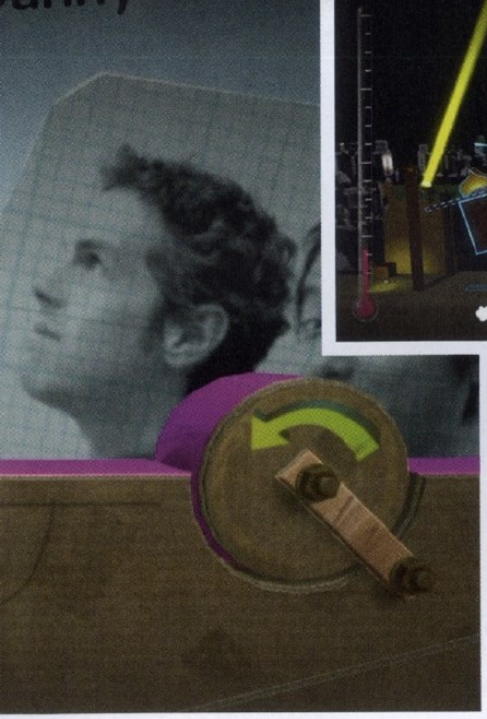
Does this make life as easy as it could be? No. It enriches it instead. As you hop, grab and swing your way through a complete level, be it yours, one of thousands sure to be uploaded, or Media Molecule's own, behind every piece is the story of how it got there – how it was brought into being with no tricks, just a spot of glue, a dab of curiosity and some perfectly selected bric-a-brac. Scientists in the **Edge** laboratory tested the principle by building the first level of *Strider*. The stars (LEDs) had to be pressed into blackened cardboard and moored to the rooftops; the searchlights were mounted on bookmarks and slipped behind the scene.

> Above all, LittleBigPlanet is a world – one built with such incredible attention to detail that you half expect it to spill from the screen



It would seem the game's undo function writes snapshots to the hard drive with every action, producing a lag hidden behind a rewind animation. The upshot of all this is that your entire creation history is saved, giving you freedom to experiment without fear of causing irreparable damage







The game's HUD – the Popit – does a remarkable job of pulling its universe together with just a few pages and a neat order of icons. Tutorials for each major item can be revisited at leisure



It isn't just textures and shaders that bring objects to life. Their physical properties are entirely convincing, from Sackboy feet gliding on glass to a top-heavy backdrop's groaning collapse



While stickers can be captured via PlayStation Eye and much of the included music split into channels you can mix, custom content seems limited by legal worries. You can't import your own music, for example, or images from your pictures folder

That's not computer-aided design – it's stagecraft, a physical kind of magic.

Work and play collide in this game with such unprecedented force that they become indistinguishable. Bungie got there first, you might argue, but there's a fundamental difference. As its irresistibly cute intro purports, *LittleBigPlanet* is a world without limits. Beyond a thermometer that tells you when your level's too complex – and we're talking *complex* – it has no ceiling. What you're given isn't just the prefabs of the platform genre or even its pieces, but its science, updated to take advantage of its host hardware's abilities and applicable to just about anything. Vertical and horizontal scrolling shooters, *Mario* clones, dialogue-driven adventure games, music boxes, score attacks, machinima, beat 'em ups, racing games, pixel art, classroom experiments, boardroom presentations: all and more are possible.

The big bang happened when the game's beta, the products of which will be kept online at launch, began last month. In the weeks since, its universe has expanded exponentially. For those inclined to enjoy rather than promote that growth, a seemingly infinite array of user-created levels awaits. Even if the monstrous task of advertising the game falls short, the userbase is speaking for itself. The wonder shows no signs of stopping, and the results will improve to the point – in some cases, they already have – where the line between developer and consumer evaporates. If money was no object and it came preinstalled on every PlayStation 3, this game would engulf us all.

Even those put off by the notable floatiness of its platforming, the sometimes unpredictable switching between planes, the enforced tutorials, and the occasional harshness of its lives system (each checkpoint gives you a fixed number of retries) would, if they opened their pores to the game's broader concept, suffer an irreversible change of heart. The one unavoidable problem is that the rating system for user-generated levels is obviously controlled by the community, and the tastes of the wider world may not match your own.

But *LittleBigPlanet* is all about changing your perspective. Just weeks after a limited preview release, this game has exploded, surely, beyond both its projections and its initial code. Even, actually, beyond the conventions of the average review. It's a multiplayer riot, a visual landmark, a feat of engineering, and one of the most charming games ever made. But even those accolades are dwarfed by its scope, its potential, and the apparent endlessness of them both. What's more, it sees the pariah of this generation, Sony, publishing at the height of its powers. Not since the early days of PlayStation has that troubled brand stood for – and fostered – such a daring, transcendent, magnificent piece of work. **[10]**



At the time of going to press, the ability to build levels via online collaboration was delayed until a post-launch update. Despite this, the multiplayer feels frighteningly complete, from the fourplayer co-op to the ease with which your ratings are stamped on other users' levels

Little Big Adventure



They can be as frustrating as any platformer, but each of Media Molecule's story levels contain more character and wit than most entire games. What's more, they advertise the in-game processes that built them, the sensors and switches that turn a few blocks of plywood into a boost-enabled car visible throughout. In order to unlock all the materials and gadgets for your maps, you have to gather them from here like capsule toys, often with the aid of a second player. This does seem obstructive at first, until you consider that the game's global repository of assets is as infinite as its users' ideas, and can be shared between them, offered as prizes within levels or added later as DLC. The Metropolis chapter, in particular, will shatter your notions of user-created content on sight.



FABLE II

FORMAT: 360 RELEASE: OCTOBER 24
PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS DEVELOPER: LIONHEAD
PREVIOUSLY IN: E180, E188, E193









The lighting is excellent, whether it's the moody gothic or bright sunshine variety. Jobs (above centre) are a way to earn cash very quickly – as you do them more you level up, and so do your earnings

Balancing acts: good and evil, purity and corruption, fat and thin. They're at the centre of *Fable II*, but the one issue everyone was really focused on was whether Lionhead would make a game that would live up to its claims, or simply another decent one with a helping of clever touches. So let's get to it. *Fable II* is Lionhead's greatest achievement to date, being both a coherent, onward-rushing adventure story that ranks with the best videogames can offer, and a beguiling patchwork of characters and side-quests that continually waylay your progress.

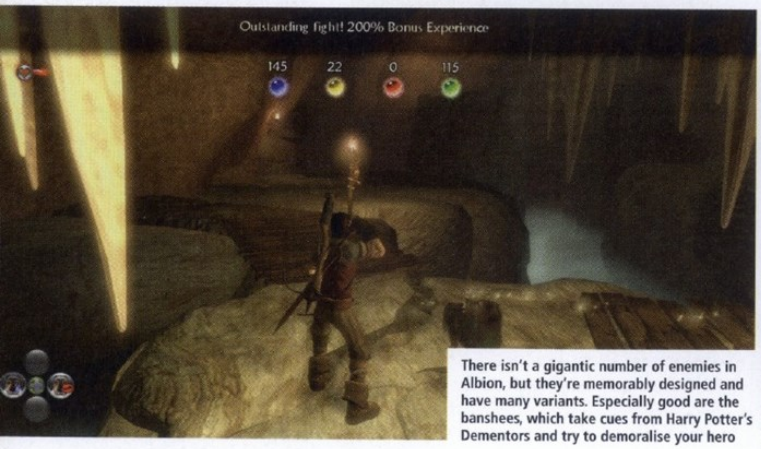
Fable was never the most serious of games, but there was something a little po-faced about how it viewed itself. There's none of that here. *Fable II* still has the occasionally irritating plumminess and enough of the old "lawks blimey, guv'nor" to tempt a village rampage, but it's constantly undercut by a deep-seated daftness. Go into someone's house, begin fumbling through their possessions and, when they run upstairs to remonstrate, execute a perfectly timed guff in their general direction before vaulting off the balcony and running away. Attract a crowd of passers-by with some nifty dancing, then flip them the finger, accompanied by a little swagger. Offer a sweetheart some chocolate, then belch in her face. Play dead (ably accompanied by your dog) and scare the wits out of a concerned citizen by waking up with a cheerful wave. Teach your dog to urinate at your command, and where you want. Launch chickens with your boot.

Choice has rarely had such a guilty laugh at the end of it. And with good reason, as *Fable II* needs the levity to offset some real bleakness. Quests that end unhappily or don't go to plan. People whose fate is left in your hands – or, occasionally, who have you at their whim. Most of all, it manages, somehow and almost bloody-mindedly, to make your decisions matter. Not in the sense that the gameworld will change (though it often does), or in a 'be-good-for-this-prize' way (though that, too, happens). You can tell they matter because you'll be looking at the screen for more than 30 seconds, actually contemplating the possibilities and probabilities of selecting different options. One decision had us pondering for a good five minutes. It goes beyond what is usual, or even unusual, and while it won't make you blub or reconsider your very being, it'll make you think about your actions in a stark light.

Those overarching quests, little stories and big decisions are one layer of *Fable II*, but they're given a particular piquancy by your character's personal involvement in the world. Whether trading clothes, having a shave or making babies, the towns are as rich, multifaceted and stuffed with surprises as any seen in a game of this type. Every building has a purpose, be it one of the many types of shop, a business that will offer you a job, or simply someone's home. Each location contains something of note, be it simply a jokey picture or a treasure chest. And every last place can be purchased.

This raises another choice: do you want to bother with all of that adventuring, or just become a landlord? Do you want to own shops or residential properties? Do you want to seduce someone's husband, then buy their marital home and kick her out? It's an entirely separate branch of activity you can pursue, and very quickly becomes hugely compulsive thanks to neat touches like rent accumulating every five minutes regardless of whether you're playing or not. To acquire the capital to become a property grandee you could become a trader, picking the right towns in which to sell your goods,

Fable II is Lionhead's greatest achievement to date, with a coherent, onward-rushing adventure story that ranks with the best the medium can offer



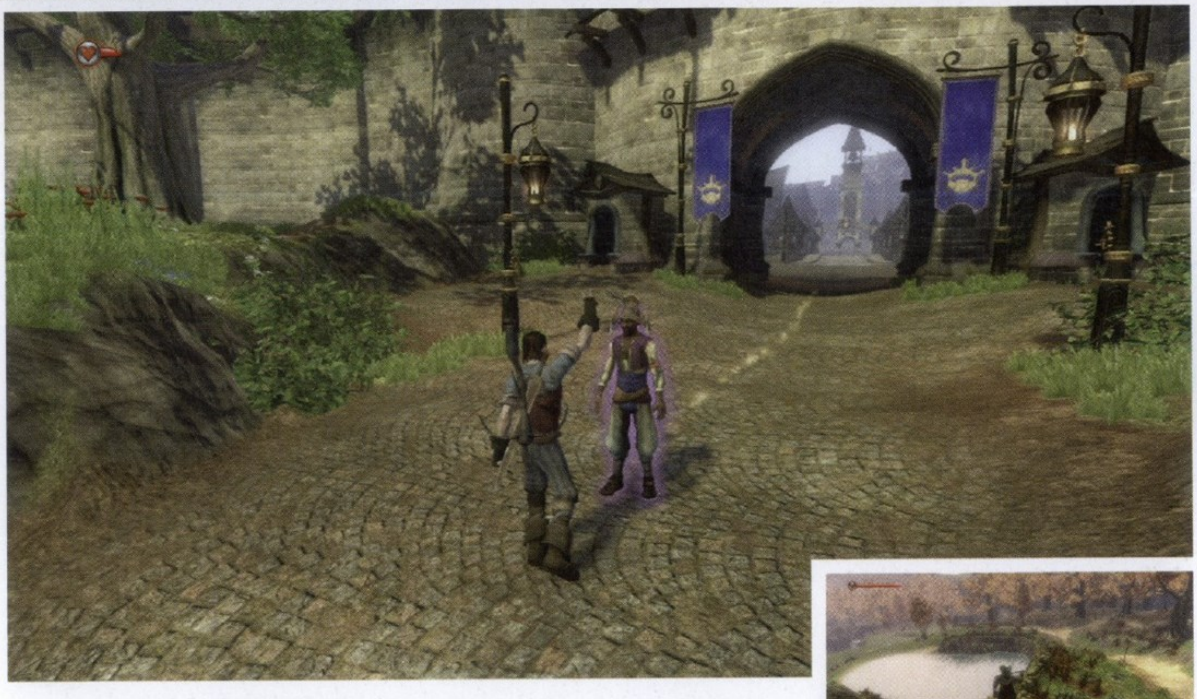
There isn't a gigantic number of enemies in Albion, but they're memorably designed and have many variants. Especially good are the banshees, which take cues from Harry Potter's Dementors and try to demoralise your hero















The combat has a real sense of 'oomph' to it – especially when you land a meaty blow and the game slows for a split second – and switching attacks is expertly engineered

There are only a few different types of each weapon, but they're balanced and the later addition of augments lets you customise them further. Who doesn't want a mighty hammer that gives you gold after every enemy it kills?

and gradually, if you're good at it, affecting entire economies. Why should that village in a pleasant location be a home for bandits and thugs? You can invest and, after a good period of development, it'll become a haven for more respectable types. And everyone will know that you were responsible.

Fable II is a world that is worth wasting time in. It's a laugh to wind up the villagers, make silly faces for the children and wink at the barmaids. Buying properties has more than just pecuniary interest, and investing in the future of Albion and its residents, however you choose to do it, is some lure.

Outside such civilised – and base – exploits, combat proves that less is often more. Assigning each of your attacks (melee, ranged and magic) to their own buttons makes the system about placement and timing rather than fast fingers. With groups of enemies, it's quickly second nature to think two or three moves ahead, always in search of the experience bonuses that the game liberally doles out.

The weakest section of the game is its handling of your early childhood years, trammelled by its tutorial undertones – a shame since, obviously, it represents the game's opening. To be fair, at least it concludes in some style. Animation, meanwhile, is often remarkable, and yet your character's manoeuvrings can feel floaty – an unfortunate failing in a game that's all about connecting with a world. *Fable II* also suffers the sort of technical issues that now feel commonplace in so many large-scale Xbox 360 releases, with pop-up and pop-in sullying the view. In terms of more random glitches, on one occasion shooting a ruffian off a ledge saw him spasm upside-down for a while, his legs twitching faster and faster until he took off into the sky.

None of it matters greatly. Once *Fable II* has its hooks in, the breadth and detail of its wonderful world swallow the minor quibbles. It's a game that builds gradually and then becomes irresistible, a beautiful lump of an RPG that continues beyond the close of its main campaign, and will have you thinking about it when you're not at your 360. With *Fable II*, there's only really one key choice: whether to play it or not. And that should be the easiest decision in Albion to make. **[9]**

There was a player had a dog...



And he follows you everywhere – most of the time, at least. Your canine companion is present throughout almost all of *Fable II*, and a welcome friend on your lonely jaunts through caves and dungeons. His behaviour doesn't seem as surprising as had been suggested, a situation not helped by constantly clipping through your character, which doesn't create much sense of a physical connection. Despite this, his ubiquity and affectionate nature will quickly win over even non-believer, and his usefulness in nosing out treasure and dig spots makes him an essential exploration aid.



FAR CRY 2

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3 RELEASE: OCTOBER 24
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT DEVELOPER: UBISOFT MONTREAL
PREVIOUSLY IN: E181, E185, E191



Enemies will chase you in vehicles, so long as they don't plough into an explosive barrel or get stuck reversing. They're also not sure what to do once they catch you, slowly getting out to give you plenty of time to riddle them with bullets







Only once, during our many hours of play, do we actually witness enemies attack one another. We assume they are of different factions, but it's impossible to tell and tricky to replicate as the mercs don't wear uniform, and the allegiance of a checkpoint is not marked on the map

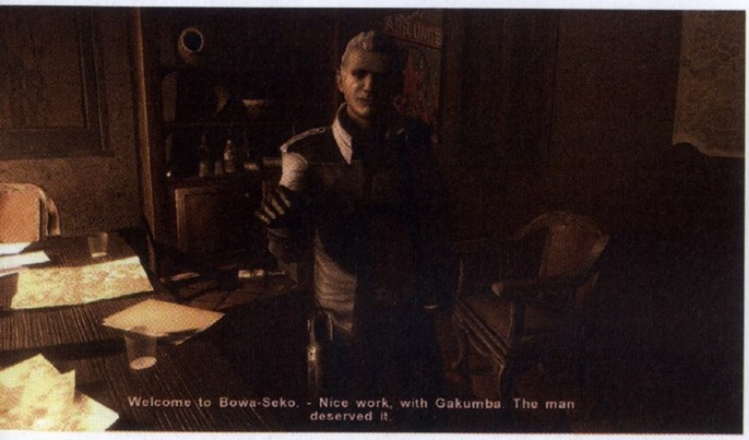
Far Cry 2 isn't especially delicate about establishing its literary intentions – before the five-minute mark is up, a notorious arms dealer called the Jackal has recited Nietzsche at you. You're here in Africa to kill him, but things haven't worked out as planned, and now you're dying of malaria while being lectured about man's 'will to power' in a peculiarly hurried monotone. *Far Cry 2* may dispense with all the sci-fi silliness of the open-world shooter that preceded it, but it is not without an otherworldly quality.

Despite initial appearances, this is neither really the Africa of grim newsreel footage nor the Africa of the safari holiday, even if the game's landscape is a magnificently observed collage of tour-guide highlights: wind-rippled savannah, thick, buzzing jungle, and red dirt escarpments. This is, reasonably explicitly, a 21st century version of the Africa imagined by Joseph Conrad, where western man journeys into psychological darkness – a place of unremitting conflict perpetuated by the mad, amoral designs of outsiders. Inevitably, in a world so bleached of its humanity, the Jackal's deeds begin to take on a new light.

> The landscape is a magnificently observed collage of tour-guide highlights: wind-rippled savannah, thick, buzzing jungle, and red dirt escarpments

Business is business, however, and surviving your fever you return to the job – but finding the Jackal isn't a matter of scouring the open world. Instead, you have to gain favour with the people to whom he supplies weapons in the hope of a tip-off. These two factions, the APR and the UFLL, are eager for a 'deniable asset' to perform a few favours for them, invariably of a bloody, explosive nature. However, since all these jobs are off the books, you'll be fair game for anyone who spots you along the way. It's not an altogether convincing explanation as to why the entire world wants to kill you the second you step out of the ceasefire zone, but it makes progress tense, if slow. Conflict is unavoidable: while this is an open world, the navigable terrain is often restricted to narrow tracks, funnelling the player between hostile guard posts. Rare is the mission in which you can reach your objective without homicidal diversion, and eventually this overwhelming hostility begins to wear – particularly when made to trot back and forth through the same guard post to find its occupants have respawned each time.

Fortunately, combat is thrilling – each weapon packing a solid, vicious blast; movement suggesting heft and momentum. These fights are always under pressure: the hand-me-down guns can jam, or fall apart entirely, and ammunition is scarce. You may even be struck by malarial dizziness while in the midst of battle. These variables, rather





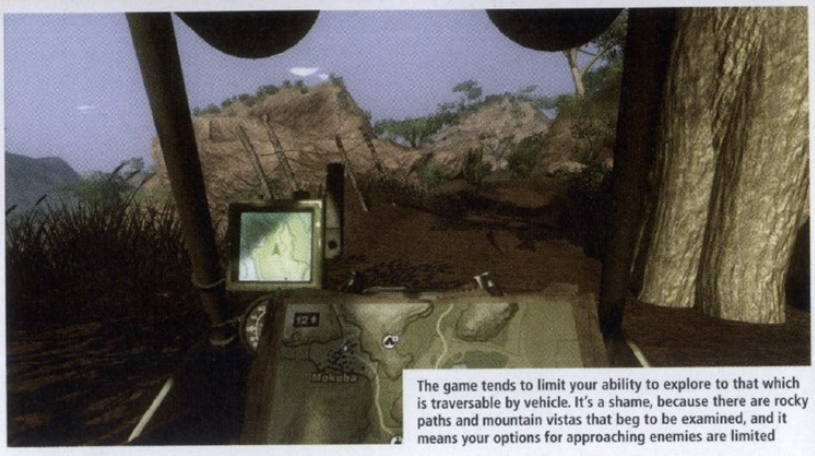




Murdering police chiefs, destroying medicine convoys, stopping water from reaching citizens: the motivations of your paymasters demand realisation in ever more bleak ways. Greaves (above) is particularly villainous, replete with British accent. Even your buddies, though friendly enough, aren't really encumbered by conscience







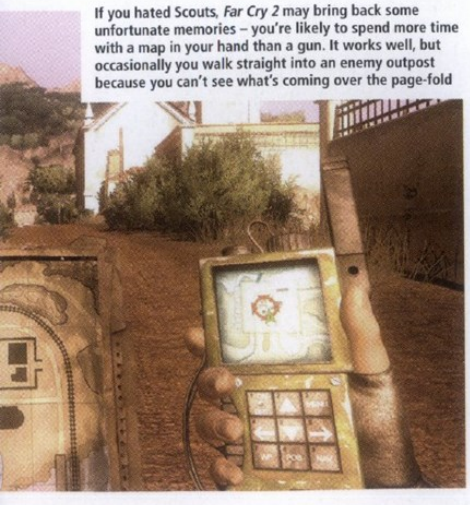
The game tends to limit your ability to explore to that which is traversable by vehicle. It's a shame, because there are rocky paths and mountain vistas that beg to be examined, and it means your options for approaching enemies are limited



Far Cry 2 moves between savannah, jungle and mountain to create perhaps the closest facsimile of actual geology yet seen in a game. Even a field of grass makes a nice view, thanks to the way it reflects the light

than being annoying, create a balanced sense of chaos that keeps the gunplay teetering on the edge of what you can control with forward planning. The AI is erratic and initially comatose, but as the game progresses, or with the difficulty cranked up, it becomes a formidable challenge. As soon as you fire a shot at a guard post, the enemies back away behind cover and attempt to encircle you, making your Molotov cocktails vital for denying them access to your flanks. But though the realistic spread of fire has its tactical applications, it's at its best when out of control, pressuring you to improvise routes out of the inferno.

If you hated Scouts, *Far Cry 2* may bring back some unfortunate memories – you're likely to spend more time with a map in your hand than a gun. It works well, but occasionally you walk straight into an enemy outpost because you can't see what's coming over the page-fold



Ubisoft manages such lethally unpredictable combat by giving the player a safety net in the form of buddies – fellow foreign mercenaries who you can meet in a place called Mike's Bar or, when asked, rescue from captivity. They will return the favour: get shot down and one of your buddies will drag you to safety, plugging a few of your would-be killers along the way. They also provide sub-missions, as whenever you take employment from one of the factions a buddy will call to ask if you'll do an extra job along the way, usually multiplying the difficulty and length of the task. It's odd to ask the player to trade narrative progression against content in this way, particularly since each mission ends with some calamity befalling your buddy, requiring you to roll your eyes, sigh and run to their aid. Our first comrade, Josip, wasn't terribly good at staying upright, and in the end we had to euthanise him at the expense of our stash of syrettes. We didn't have any left for Warren when he hit the dirt – he became a sunbeam in the sky by way of our trusty sidearm. About the time we accidentally set Marty on fire we decided we should probably ride alone in the future.

All this would be terribly moving if your interaction with your buddies continued in any significant way outside of issuing quests. This is perhaps the major problem with the game – its narrative is saddled to a strict mission progression outside of which the world is largely meaningless. A colonial fort will be occupied by soldiers, but there won't be any reason to assault it until the story-significant NPC is spawned upon activation of a quest. You can blow away countless mercenaries, but there is little to make your actions feel weighty or persistent. Even the much-vaunted dynamic storyline is impotent – you can pick from a number of avatars, each with different buddies available from the start, but they all offer the same sub-missions. With the moments of real, ground-shaking change reserved for widely spaced plot-beats, the game is slow to reward and the need to obtain medicine or buy guns sometimes feels more like a deferral of progress than additional world texture.

Despite this, *Far Cry 2* belatedly takes you in a direction that is bolder and more surreal than the initial premise suggests. While heavy-handed in its literary aspirations, the plot climax is smartly intertwined with play – shocking and lunatic in equal measure. Throughout, the game's gunplay is honed to eke out the perfect balance of tension and empowerment, and its world so beautifully drawn that simply being in it is a pleasure. You may wonder whether the heart of darkness should really be this appealing. **[8]**

Little consolation



There's surprisingly little to differentiate the console versions from their PC brother. Both have comprehensive editing tools, and visually the console iterations aren't far behind the PC's high-end settings while delivering a reliably consistent framerate. The major issue dividing the two is the save system. The PC allows saving anywhere, while the console version goes for a bemusing compromise of save locations and abrupt mission-complete save prompts. It's clearly a last-minute compromise but, given the dangers of *Far Cry 2*'s world, this is occasionally punitive and makes players risk-averse.



DEAD SPACE

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3 (VERSION TESTED)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (360, PS3), OCTOBER 31 (PC)
PUBLISHER: EA DEVELOPER: EA REDWOOD SHORES
PREVIOUSLY IN: E183, E187, E191



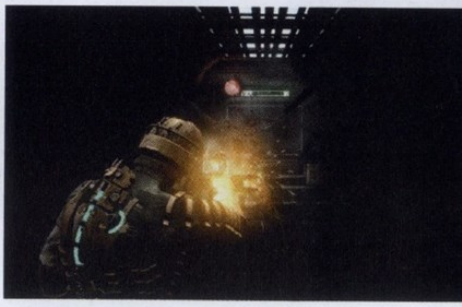
A seriously sexy HUD literally projects your inventory and data from Clarke's suit, becoming just another object in its world. Pan the camera around it, and Clarke's line of sight even follows the different menu options. He does seem to be a bit short-sighted, though

Prior to the release of *Dead Space*, EA put 100 of the best sci-fi and horror movies up for grabs in an online competition. A word of caution to the winner, though: if the game is anything to go by, each DVD has been watched 100 times already. Taking Event Horizon and *Resident Evil 4* as its starting points, this survival horror reverse engineers its entire genre before rebuilding it so its parts fit better. And if misdirection is the heart of a good scare, this one comes from an unlikely place – Redwood Shores, the nebulous outfit behind *The Godfather* and *The Simpsons Game*.





Clicking the thumbstick projects a reliable route-finder from Clarke's downturned palm, which together with ubiquitous save and checkpoints strips the game of wearisome backtracking and irksome repetition



Dead Space's production values are out of this world, creating one of the most dramatic environments a game has seen



In what can only be described as daylight robbery, the game has its own *Resi 4*-style Regenerator bosses that sprout new limbs after a short period of time. Thankfully, they act as lynchpins to more complex, rewarding set-pieces

That its story is a complete rip-off is mitigated somewhat by its honesty – its hero's name is Isaac Clarke, after all. Marooned with the surviving members of his investigation team aboard the mining ship Ishimura, he quickly discovers that, while the lights are all off, everyone's still home. Many are spread across the walls and ceiling, though, and most others have become screeching mash-ups of regurgitated flesh and bone. Luckily, being a technician, Clarke's a dab hand with laser cutting tools and broken fuseboxes, which is just as well.

Exotic locations such as the mining deck, engine room and medical bay await – but stay with us here, because *Dead Space* is a surprisingly dynamic, luxuriously expensive game. Not in dollars, perhaps, and certainly not in living quarters, but in sheer creative oomph. Its production values are out of this world, creating one of the most dramatic environments a game has ever seen. And what it takes from *Resident Evil 4* – and it takes covetously – is the clever stuff, the enemies built entirely around your weapon-set, the combat full of upset rhythms and immoral thrills, the unrepentant game-isms, and the vital ability to wrong-foot players at all the right moments.

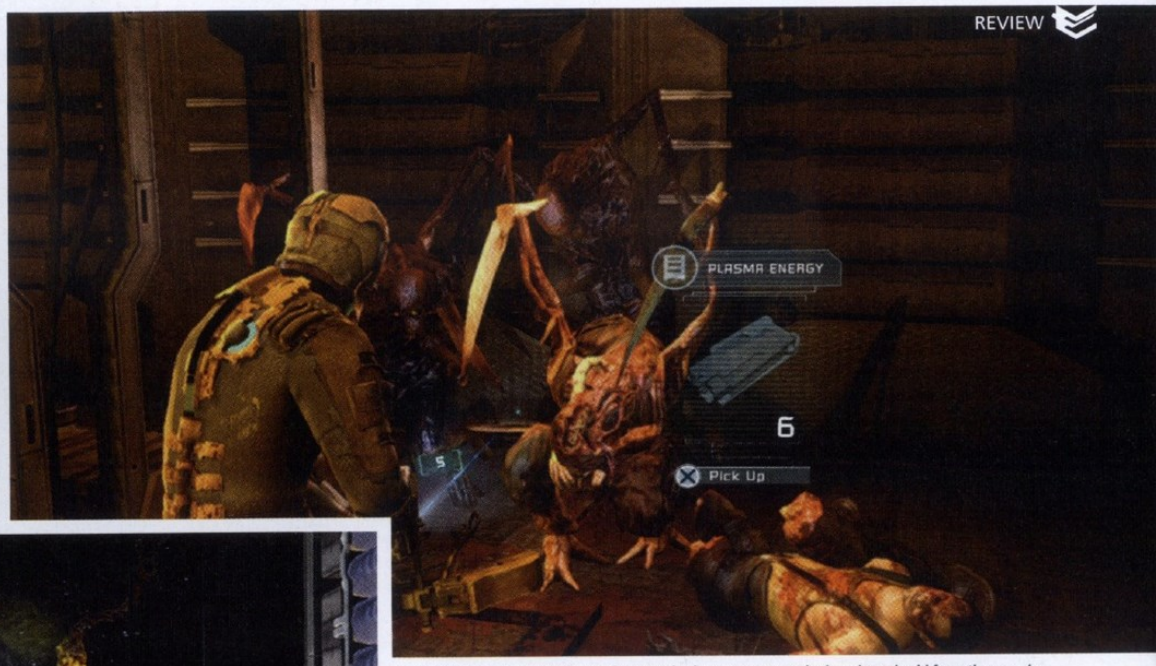
Like most survival horrors, the key to its combat is the management of panic – which is easier said than done when a giant pile of guts and knives comes bombing around the corner. A gleefully explicit amputation system chops up enemies with *Crysis*-like precision,





Dead Space has all the hallmarks of a budding franchise, right down to the anime tie-in, graphic novel and universe of details that lend it a peculiar kind of charm. The Ishimura isn't just a mining ship, for example, it's a 'Planet Cracker', able to prise mountainous chunks out of its quarry which are then held aloft from the ground







In addition to the laser cutting tools, several other weapons can be bought and sold from the game's stores. The Ripper recalls *Unreal Tournament* as it projects a buzz-saw blade to a fixed distance, rewarding a steady hand with *Dead Rising*-style chopping. Others include a classic pulse rifle and, ahem, gravity gun

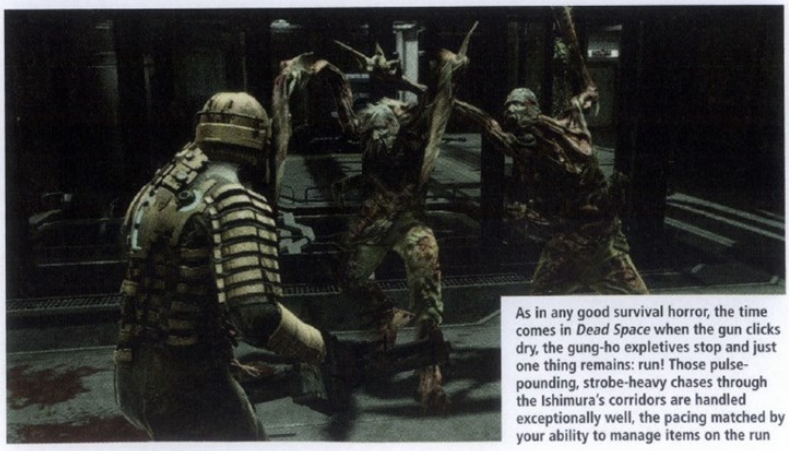
replacing the headshot as the most cost-effective kill. But there are no guarantees. Littered with ammo, money and chances to waste them both, it takes you to the limit of your resources and often beyond, at times even forcing you to sell your precious weapons for just a handful of the right bullets. Its inventory system, manageable even as you're fleeing through tight corridors, is either ingeniously balanced or a complete fluke. It deserves the benefit of the doubt.

For this and other reasons, the game exists on a knife-edge. And when you're not studiously reloading all of your weapons – you have slots for four but are able to put others in storage – you're wondering when it will fall. A vertiginously hardcore arena battle, perhaps, a cheap boss or a trip to the 'toilets and packing crates' level. Trapped on a Nostromo-esque company ship in a Capcom-inspired game, surely they're just around the corner.

Or not, as the case may be. Instead, the bosses go easy, the ship is never as dull as its blueprints suggest (though there are toilets), and the battles are tweaked almost to perfection, often with a satisfying gimmick to round them off. The frequent trips into zero-gravity are outstanding, not to mention a gore-hound's delight. And with save points on almost every wall and checkpoints at almost every door, it doesn't outstay its welcome. The developer may have copied but it has also learned – and what it's learned most of all is that gamers, much like moviegoers, don't like to think about their aching buttocks. As such, the only things stopping you are fear and the prospect of a cup of tea.

Those expecting evil twins, monsters from the id and blood pouring out of the elevator shafts, though, should probably go after those 100 DVDs instead. Perhaps inevitably, the game is no better at imitating classic psychological horrors than Event Horizon before it, the story reaching a similarly hare-brained conclusion. Its final plot twist is so Earth-shatteringly obvious that even Clarke puts his hand to his forehead, and the characters around him work almost entirely as dynamos for tension and plot. This is stellar stuff, regardless, but more in the vein of Alien than Don't Look Now.

Word has it that *Dead Space* began life as a 'skunkworks' project – a hands-off experiment designed to test unproven talent and forge new IP. There are also apocryphal tales of numerous project restarts. Whatever the truth, Redwood Shores can at least take its unenviable reputation – *From Russia With Love*, anyone? – and blast it out the nearest airlock. With the aforementioned J-horrors approaching difficult fifth instalments, the nightmares resume here. **[8]**



As in any good survival horror, the time comes in *Dead Space* when the gun clicks dry, the gung-ho expletives stop and just one thing remains: run! Those pulse-pounding, strobe-heavy chases through the Ishimura's corridors are handled exceptionally well, the pacing matched by your ability to manage items on the run

Sounds of silence



In the undervalued world of game audio, *Dead Space* is a milestone, creeping its way past *Halo 3* and *MGS4* to the front of the pack. As its music shifts dynamically between subtly chilling and urgent cues, its surround mix plays all manner of mindgames, a mere brush with a table sending objects clattering across the floor. Clarke's suit-assisted breathing doubles as a health and air supply warning, while communications between his crewmates burst on to the airwaves and battle with interference, some of it mechanical, some of it something else. The Ishimura, meanwhile, groans like the big metal tomb that it is, its recorded announcements echoing indifferently through its cavernous chambers. Where the hull's been ripped open, all is reduced to just muffled thumps, enemies using the silence to their advantage. Be warned that standard stereo provides only half the experience.



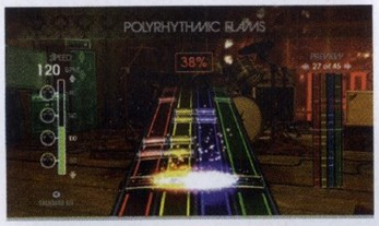
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Jump in.

XBOX 360 LIVE
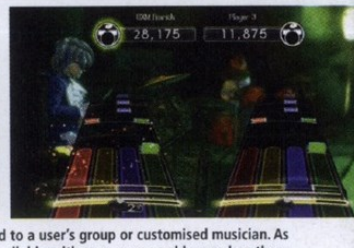






Rock Band 2's tracklisting is arguably the strongest in a rhythm game yet, including original tracks performed by Bob Dylan, Fleetwood Mac and AC/DC, among others







The *Rock Band 2* website offers merchandise that's tailored to a user's group or customised musician. As well as figurines, T-Shirts, stickers and posters will all be available with your group emblazoned on them



ROCK BAND 2

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PS3 RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: EA DEVELOPER: HARMONIX

It's one thing to explode on to the scene with a breakthrough debut – fulfilling second-release expectation is the hardest part. For *Rock Band 2*, Harmonix has played it safe, remastering the original and providing plenty of bonuses for the fans. The restrictive World Tour has been subtly improved: players can now play with any combination of local and online friends, providing a sense of progression through venues even when bandmates aren't present locally. Members are no longer restricted to just one instrument either, removing the chore of creating multiple profiles and making it easier to maintain a single identity.

It's also possible to play through the tour on your own, and although this isn't comparable to the satisfaction gained from an enthusiastic multiplayer session, it provides opportunity to complete the more taxing and lengthy setlists without forcing undesirable songs on unwilling visitors. And now staff members can be employed, too. They do no more than modify the amount of cash or fans earned per gig, while opening doors for charity events and passive video shoots but, regardless, they come as a welcome addition, bringing more credibility to emulating the 'band experience' that the original aimed to provide.

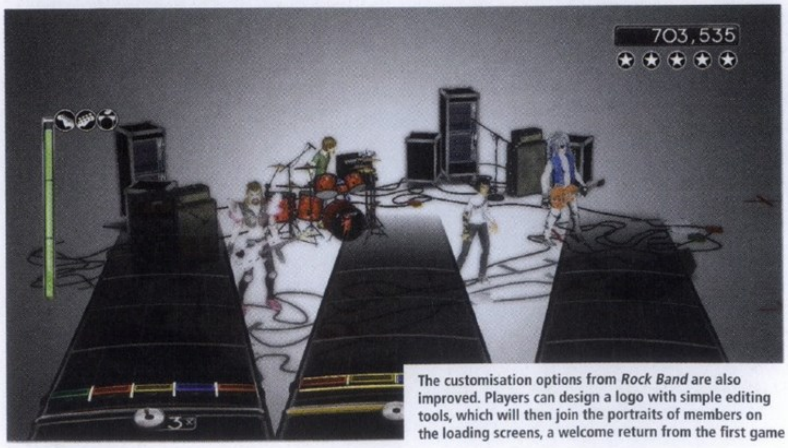
There's also the inclusion of Battle of the Bands mode, a rotating selection of challenges which range from achieving the best streak of notes on a certain track to getting the highest score on a specified set of songs. Although this equates to nothing more than an ever-changing score attack, it's sure to build community ties between the more competitive players on the circuit.

Guitar Hero's later iterations have relied on the variation of music available to add appeal, and *Rock Band 2*'s rejoinder is to allow owners of the first game to import 53 of its 58 tracks for a small price, along with any songs previously purchased from the *Rock Band* store. Combine this with the 84 tracks on the *Rock Band 2* disc, and the 20 soon-to-be-released downloads that come as part of the purchase, and the selection screen starts to look genuinely daunting. Thankfully, the interface has been given a much-needed tweak, with multiple search options to speed up navigation.

But aspiring percussionists are in for the biggest treats. The Drum Trainer takes you from the simplest 4/4 beats to some genuinely taxing and rhythmically accurate grooves. This works in conjunction with the Fill Trainer which lists 45 different fills to be played at increasingly faster speeds. Progress is tracked, supplying a quick-fix challenge mode with an aim to perform every exercise at 180bpm. It feels more contrived than perhaps really fits with the *Rock Band* ethos, but supplies an addictive alternative to simple career progression. These features succeed in elevating the *Rock Band* experience to a challenging tuition tool, if desired.

But the most welcome addition is probably the most simple. The inclusion of a 'no fail' mode means that the sequel achieves the social play it originally strove for. Now newcomers can experience the feeling of being a rock star without worrying about score, musical knowledge or dexterity.

By polishing away blemishes, *Rock Band 2* carefully improves on its predecessor. Those expecting the likes of music-making functionality perhaps aren't quite on *Rock Band*'s wavelength, which is about performance, not creativity. That Harmonix has stayed absolutely true to that idea has demonstrated that sequels don't necessarily need to innovate to succeed, after all. **[9]**

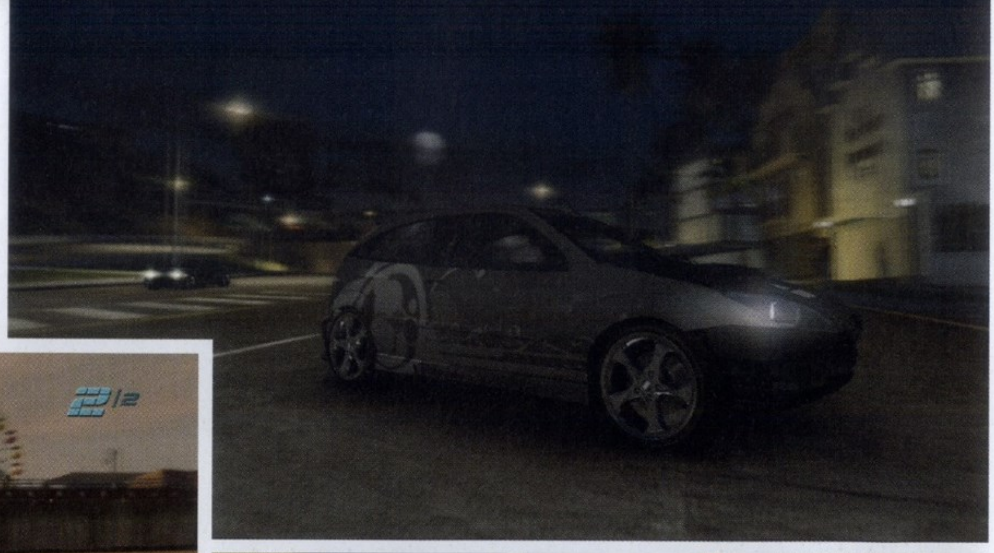


The customisation options from *Rock Band* are also improved. Players can design a logo with simple editing tools, which will then join the portraits of members on the loading screens, a welcome return from the first game

Axe and skins



The *Rock Band 2* guitars feature some improvements, including sensors that will configure your AV kit, compensating for lag, plus a more defined strumming action and significantly improved fret buttons, while the drums have a reinforced pedal and the capacity for future cymbal attachments. These additions make the kit feel more authentic to those in the know, a point substantiated by the new pressure-sensitive pads, which provide opportunity for dynamic range. The kit is quieter to play, too, yet still supplies a more vivid rebound than the first model. Whether they truly justify an upgrade from their older brothers is a question of personal preference, of course.



Midnight Club: Los Angeles boasts an extensive mission list, and it takes a large amount of time to earn enough money and respect to gain access to the more powerful cars and bikes in the modest roster of vehicles







MIDNIGHT CLUB: LOS ANGELES

FORMAT: 360, PS3 (VERSION TESTED) RELEASE: OCTOBER 24
PUBLISHER: ROCKSTAR DEVELOPER: ROCKSTAR SAN DIEGO
PREVIOUSLY IN: E191

The *Midnight Club* series has always been a refreshing tonic to *Need For Speed*'s more proscribed action. Less street circuit racing and more high-speed orienteering exercises, Rockstar's games tend to take full advantage of an open cityscape, surely crafted with the help of in-house hand-me-downs of *Grand Theft Auto* technology. To that end, *Midnight Club: Los Angeles* embraces the engine that powered *GTAIV*, but while the technical benefits are apparent, little of the charm has made the leap to Rockstar's second-string project.

The clue to *Los Angeles'* most hobbling impediment is in the title. Los Angeles is a largely characterless urban sprawl and a huge proportion of the map is consigned to the uniform network of blocks that typifies US town planning. As the camera zooms out to the *Test Drive Unlimited*-inspired map view, you're left in no doubt that it's an ample geographical area, but with little in the way of sights to see as you tear around its parades of right-angled corners, it feels considerably more confined. The slice of city is vast and detailed, but districts are barely distinguishable from one to another – authentic it may be, but some may find themselves yearning for the neon automotive playground that is Tokyo, the perennial favourite of the series and home to the street-racing teams that inspired it.

Aside from the disappointing lack of local flavour, *Los Angeles* is a competent renewal for this gentle rebellion against the constraints of circuit-based racers. The vehicles barrel between heavy traffic with tight arcade-styled handling, and with the help of an injection of nitrous, a perspective-warping camera-pull and a dollop of motion blur, it's suitably swift at the top end. Devil-may-care attitudes should be checked at the door, however, since there's none of the satisfying, pseudo-masochistic release that *Burnout Paradise* provides when you meet LA's famously hellish traffic head on – expect an inertia-deadening impact and a canned spin instead. More impressive is the cunning opponent AI, which makes every effort to shake you from its slipstream or block boost-assisted passes.

The overwhelming impression *Los Angeles* leaves is very slick, but it's ultimately quite soulless. The numerous characters you encounter throughout your career are bland street-racer stereotypes – well voiced, but with little or nothing to say for themselves. The racing is engaging, but the form was established on the previous generation and has seen little in the way of evolution here. With competition from EA looking decidedly limp, *Los Angeles'* technically accomplished and solidly designed action should probably be the choice for street-racing fans this year. It's just not quite the likeable underdog the series once was. **[7]**



LA's notorious rush-hour traffic requires deft manoeuvring to avoid. The game does a fine job of congesting the freeways, but it's a shame those inevitable collisions don't convey a little more of the impact you'd expect

Mirror, signal, electrocute



***Midnight Club*'s best-kept secret is its occasional concession to unreality. Cars can be upgraded with weaponry that would seem more at home in *Wipeout*'s futuristic garages than an LA chop shop. EMP blasts that disable competitors, the ability to slow down time and a shockwave that sends opponents spearing off the road are all suitably satisfying, particularly during the dash to the final checkpoint. In addition, all cars are capable of driving on two wheels and can charge a nitro boost while positioned in another car's slipstream.**





Motorcycles make an appearance again, and with no need for a mammoth *Burnout*-style downloadable update either. They're extremely quick, but will catapult your rider's fragile form at the merest whiff of an impact, making them a challenging but viable alternative to cars





While not quite as ludicrous as competitor *Pure*'s altitude-sickness-inducing jumps, *Pacific Rift* does a good line in sheer drops and hard landings. One course sees drivers teetering on the very edge of a cliff as they race along







The addition of monster trucks is unlikely to distract players for long. They're light on wanton destruction, and the cumbersome handling and top-heavy weight distribution mean that it's the buggies and bikes that will see the biggest cut of elective play



MOTORSTORM: PACIFIC RIFT

FORMAT: PS3 RELEASE: NOVEMBER 14
PUBLISHER: SCE DEVELOPER: EVOLUTION
PREVIOUSLY IN: E190, E193

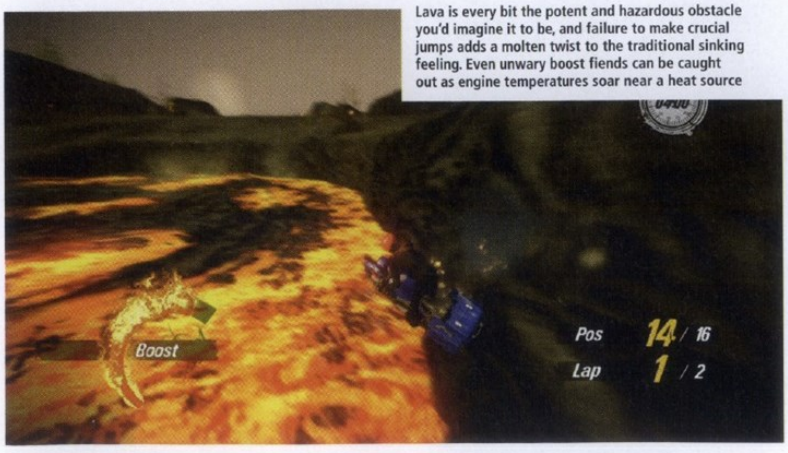
The first flushes of a console launch hide a multitude of sins. While *MotorStorm* isn't the prime candidate from PS3's natal period for retrospective denouncement by over-exuberant critics – that dubious honour is perhaps reserved for *Resistance: Fall of Man* – Evolution would still have to live up to its name to make its sequel pass muster now that Sony's platform has bedded in.

Refinement is the watchword for *Pacific Rift*, and transplanting the action to a more verdant setting is the most drastic shift of gear. The new venue, on an active volcanic island, allows for far greater variety in both scenery and terrain, making progress through the career an instantly more compelling prospect, and the 16 courses are designed around four elemental motifs. Earth zone tracks are traditional mud and dirt scrambles, albeit lined with far more vegetation, the Air zone caters for Rain God Mesa-inspired precipice hopping, Water zone courses involve brushes with rivers, waterfalls and the mighty Pacific itself, and the Fire zone is a series of frantic rallies past viscous lava flows. With a more consistently high standard of circuit design, the four corners of the island very nearly merit the number of repeated visits the career mode imposes.

The elemental theme also carries over to the boost system – a nuance that adds an optional strategic layer to *MotorStorm*'s existing mechanic. Overheating engines will dodge combustion when submerged in water and risk premature failure when exposed to the heat of fire or molten rock. It's simply an extra consideration when choosing a route, but canny players will no doubt reap the rewards in multiplayer. It's not the only area of the core racing package that has seen an overhaul, either. Handling has been noticeably tuned on many of the vehicles, particularly on the bikes, making it easier to clip the frond-lined apex as opposed to glacially orbiting it with catastrophic understeer. Evolution still insists on including certain classes that are simply no fun to drive, though, and attempting to persuade catatonic big rigs around an anfractuous Gordian knot of narrow dirt roads remains a torturous exercise in futility.

There are several areas in which this more ambitious sequel's art direction fails to hurdle the limitations of the engine, and without exception the distant vistas are the primary visual draw on every circuit. *Pacific Rift* appears far more reliant on shaders in the foreground than its predecessor, and the visuals suffer overall as a result. There are some unpleasantly broad strokes on many of the ground textures, which blend into amorphousness mere metres ahead. The problem is only exacerbated by excessive motion blur, further serving to muddy the aesthetic – though not in the fashion Evolution intended.

Pacific Rift certainly feels a more complete game than its predecessor, but the state of the art has moved on considerably since the original wowed at launch. The game is disappointingly unattractive given the spectacular natural source that inspired it, and that ugliness conceals a conceptually beautiful game: looking beyond the Vaseline-smeared lens, you'll find that many of the original's irksome rough edges have been smoothed away as well. **[7]**



Lava is every bit the potent and hazardous obstacle you'd imagine it to be, and failure to make crucial jumps adds a molten twist to the traditional sinking feeling. Even unwary boost fiends can be caught out as engine temperatures soar near a heat source

Screen rift



There's no question that Evolution should be applauded for including a splitscreen multiplayer mode, particularly a fourplayer one, at a point in the generation where many developers cite a lack of budget, time or resources to implement what used to be considered an essential component of the racing game. Vegetation is hacked back as severely as you'd expect, and it's far more challenging to read the frequent changes in surface, but the game remains eminently playable even at postage stamp size. No doubt more traditionally social gamers, who are currently most spoilt by downloadable and retro titles, will be hoping this marks a change in the industry and a triumphant return for the ancient art of illicit glances at an opponent's portion of the screen.



Jump in.

XBOX 360. LIVE







LEGO BATMAN

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS2, PS3, WII (VERSION TESTED)
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: WARNER BROS
DEVELOPER: TRAVELLER'S TALES PREVIOUSLY IN: E186, E192

You can't deny that *Lego Batman* knows its limits. The problem is, its limits are 'Lego' and 'Batman'. That much it can handle with confidence and wit. Everything else quickly becomes a struggle

The Lego part was always a given, but it's surprising just how successfully Traveller's Tales has captured Gotham City. Smoky spires rise into the brooding sky, the streets are a lurid, rain-slicked menace, and the simple story provides a speed-run through the Dark Knight's signature enemies. Beyond that point, however, the game loses its poise. The series' punishingly regular release schedule has led to gameplay that is starting to feel stagnant and inbred. Little has been done to improve the flabby level design of *Lego Indiana Jones*, while the mechanics have mutated from self-conscious quirkiness and into the realms of the genuinely bizarre. The *Lego* series is hardly losing its charm, but charm alone may now be all it really has.

The puzzles are the biggest problem. Four games of increasingly undisciplined design have brought an unlovably arbitrary nature to many of *Lego Batman*'s set-pieces. Traveller's Tales' model is apparently the piñata, favouring colourful surprises over substance. The solution to a locked door might be locating a key, but it's more likely to be something entirely unforeseeable, such as coaxing a disco-dancing robot into busting through the wall, or building a switch out of the blocky remains of a flower bed.

It quickly becomes apparent that the only way to proceed with challenges this illogical is to try everything – and with that realisation the rewards slip away, and you're left with something truly mindless. After defeating a roomful of enemies, you're likely to find yourself tiresomely kung-fuing your way through the furniture and set dressings as well, hoping the resulting shower of bricks provides the gimmicky means of accessing the next room where the process will repeat itself. Beating up a lamppost doesn't make you feel like much of a superhero.

Sadly, when the puzzles break down, the platforming isn't there to come to the rescue. Unlimited lives have long been necessary in this series given the floaty movement, and they're increasingly becoming a testament to design failure and weak physics. And while a new range of suits giving Batman and Robin different abilities would seem to add a fresh dimension to the levels, they're largely uninteresting – even the prospect of wings inevitably becomes another variation on lock-and-key gameplay, useful for overcoming the next obstacle, but no fun in its own right.

Despite these faults, such is the strength of the premise that there are moments – mostly when you're sitting back to take in the amiable characters and artful setting – when you could almost forgive it all. But there are signs that even the developers know the series is starting to look creaky. Twin hero and villain campaigns is generosity of the slightly desperate variety, and regularly plummeting to your death in a game's hubworld is rarely a sign of design probity.

Too brainless for adults, and increasingly too frustrating and needlessly obtuse for children, *Lego Batman* makes the simplest mistake any franchise title can: it serves the licence, and nobody else. The presentation may still be rock solid, but this house of bricks has definitely been built on sand. **[4]**





Heroes have grappling hooks and suits that let them stick to surfaces, glide, plant bombs or handle different bricks. Villains make do with a few stand-out powers while stats, collectables and completion meters carry the day again

Falling to your death is a regular treat – a result of wonky cameras, dark environments and sticky controls. Batman's stoic frown and occasional wry smirk are so simply captured, you almost forgive it





Previous games have struggled to combine the chunky plastic of the Lego with the slightly more naturalistic backdrops. *Lego Batman* succeeds, however, partly due to the angular and boxy urban environment of Gotham itself

Where does he get those wonderful toys?



If you get the feeling that you may have played *Lego Batman*'s driving sections before, you probably have. The sequences appear to have been largely lifted from the *Lego Star Wars* games, with different maps and a bit of plastic surgery along the way. A Batwing fight against the Scarecrow's plane is a particularly blatant piece of recycling, awkwardly exchanging the trenches of the Death Star for the rooftops of Gotham, but retaining the original's weapons, handling and barriers to progression. While this is likely down to releasing four similar games relatively quickly, it remains enduringly hard to forgive someone who's promised you a ride in a Batmobile but then turns up in a re-skinned Snow Speeder instead.



FRACTURE

FORMAT: 360, PS3 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: LUCASARTS DEVELOPER: DAY 1 STUDIOS
PREVIOUSLY IN: E176, E188, E191





Bull shot



***Fracture*'s immaterial plot pits you against a series of genetically modified enemies, the largest of which is some sort of techno-minotaur you will encounter in recurring boss battles. Since it can kill you nearly instantly, trying new tactics inevitably entails a tedious sequence of loading screens, but even when you have the knack of avoiding its attacks, the three weakpoints require a fair few minutes of concentrated fire before it goes down. If the hungry consumption of time in such a dull pursuit wasn't already enough to make you painfully aware of the diminishing hours of your life, later battles introduce even more cheap ways to kill the player.**

It's "pretty standard" according to Jet Brody. He's our protagonist, or at least would be if he had any character, and though he's commenting on the tutorial's introduction to the HUD, he might as well be talking about *Fracture* as a whole. It's a game so unerringly standard, it could be sold flat-packed for home assembly – the accompanying Swedish instructions reading 'insert charmless meathead A into anodyne shooter environment B'. Yes, your health recharges like in *Halo*. Yes, your power-armoured avatar has a roady-run like in *Gears*. Yes, locations feature both lava and luminous green slime. Freedom is under threat from a megalomaniac hoping to do mischief with – yes – a giant robo-spider. The game also comes fitted with regrettable driving sections. It's all pretty standard.

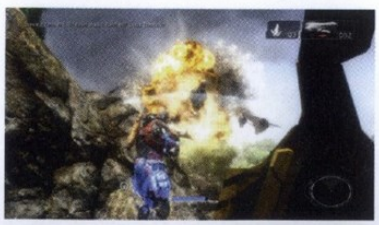
So far, so five. But if the only thing you could say about *Fracture* was that it managed to pinpoint the very definition of mediocrity, then it would be a better game than it is. The dips below baseline competence come more frequently as the game progresses – there's a smattering of glitches, weird checkpointing decisions, tedious puzzle design and an appalling boss battle that you have to fight several times over by the game's ending. All of which might have been forgivable had *Fracture* ever dared to interest you with its dim enemies or limp weaponry. Things explode with titillating excess and the arsenal has a certain flamboyant variety, but combat is universally sludgy in feel and the stingy supply of ammo for the more exciting tools often leaves you resorting to the standard-issue pea-shooter.

Sad to say, what irks most of all is the one glittering bead of innovative spirit that the game possesses. This is the game's terrain deformation, which, in early viewings, held the potential to elevate the game from generic trappings, voiding the linear conventions of the genre by enabling players to carve their own routes through the world. Instead, using Brody's arm-mounted Entrencher device, the player can only raise and lower the terrain in certain areas, and only to a certain degree. You can pump up a lump of soil in one place, but a thin layer of tarmac thwarts your efforts elsewhere. While it's useful for creating cover, Day 1 has found the only way in which it could implement such a mechanic without it actually having any meaningful effect on the game's structure whatsoever. Buildings and large objects are unaffected, unless they form part of a contrived puzzle. Raise the ground to push some giant plug into its socket, or restore a broken walkway; lower the ground to remove a piece of concrete from the path of a laser beam. There's nothing organic about these puzzles, and, while they are rarely difficult to work out, there is something strikingly false about the way the world is rigidly categorised into immovable, scripted or physics-enabled objects.

Fracture is a game that had one good idea, stopped there, and then decided that was too risky as well. Given that its bland combat is little enhanced by the ability to create cover, you suspect that the promises made for the technology have simply dug its own grave. **[4]**



Checkpointing is sometimes cruel in its rarity, but mostly manages to be fairly regular, if somewhat odd in the moments it chooses – sometimes checkpointing just before you kill the last two enemies in an area



The west coast of America setting could have really brought a distinct character to *Fracture*'s environments; unfortunately, apart from a glimpse of the Golden Gate Bridge, you find yourself largely stuck in the usual explosive-filled sci-fi factories



Level design is mostly strictly linear, although it still occasionally manages to confuse, since exits to the next section are sometimes obscurely placed or inexplicably unavailable until you've finished killing all the bad guys



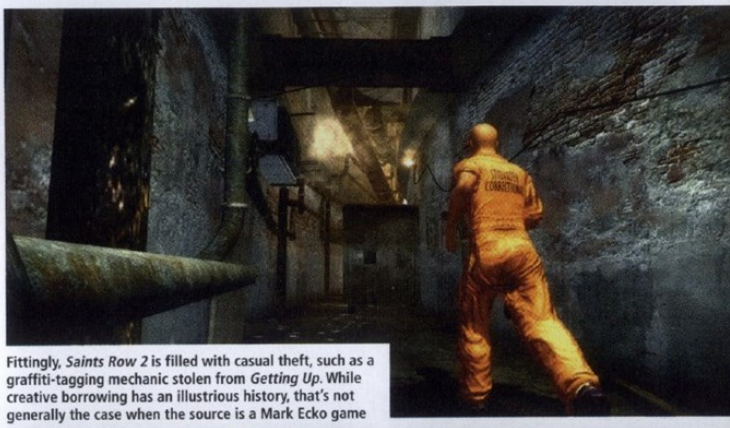


You can answer your phone with the Y button, but there's often a delay before you know it's worked. Press it again to make sure and, if driving, you'll eject yourself from your car. It's not the only instance of irritating design



SAINTS ROW 2

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PC, PS3 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: THQ DEVELOPER: VOLITION PREVIOUSLY IN: E189



Fittingly, *Saints Row 2* is filled with casual theft, such as a graffiti-tagging mechanic stolen from *Getting Up*. While creative borrowing has an illustrious history, that's not generally the case when the source is a Mark Ecko game





Saints Row 2 is two games in one. The first game is capable, competently paced and crammed with distractions; the second can be needlessly cruel, tiresome and ultimately rather depressing. In blending the two, Volition has created a genuine talking point: this is a title that challenges you to examine the relationship between content and context, to explore how the success of a game's mechanics is affected by the bodywork bolted on top.

Those mechanics will be familiar. Tear around the city, acquire a reputation, take on rivals and, inevitably, spend at least a little while parachuting out of a plane in your underwear while trying to land in a swimming pool. No one could accuse *Saints Row 2* of lacking diversions. Stilwater may not be the most detailed of environments – even up close it tends to seem out-of-focus and under-imagined – but from the lengthy character customisation process through co-op and multiplayer options to the surprisingly varied side-quests, there's enough to keep you plugging away.

Yet what makes this otherwise generic experience truly individual is the unremitting unpleasantness in every level of its design, from the missions (kill a doctor, butcher homeless people, blow up a trailer park), to the parade of stereotypes the game scrapes together to tell its tale of revenge. *GTA* may have explored a similarly seamy side of life, but recent releases have tended to ground the player in some kind of otherness, presenting their world from a perspective of (often sympathetic) exclusion, adding a moral dimension by offering real characters and consequences. While *Saints Row 2* stalks somewhat similar territory, its blank-slate protagonist and fratboy misanthropy invites you to view society as nothing more than a bloodied rabble of interchangeable freaks, where the only human distinctions are whether you're alive or dead, and the only character development is how you transition from the first state to the second.

It's an agenda that eventually undermines the largely capable missions, as the game piles on the brutal wackiness, unaware that there's no drama to be had in a world designed with such a contemptuous vision, and that violence carries little weight when everyone's equally ugly, or stupid, or callous. It doesn't help that the whole thing feels so unconvincing – even as a pastiche of gangsta life, its recruitable homies and upgradeable bling are flimsy constructions.

So while dredging up such calculated grottiness has granted *Saints Row 2* an identity to call its own, the price it pays is desensitisation. Few of the game's details will stick in your mind for long, and its pranky focus means it rarely gives you anything interesting to do with the toys on offer. It's not necessarily badly constructed, but in many ways it is badly intentioned, failing not just because of its conga-line of racial and sexual clichés, but because of the way it makes it a little bit easier to criticise videogaming as a hollow and sadistic pursuit.

Despite being ostensibly cut from the same cloth as Rockstar's series, in some ways *Saints Row 2* is the anti-*GTAIV* – something that has been reflected in its marketing. If the advertisements tempt you to give it a try, prepare to do so with gritted teeth. **[5]**



Shooting while driving returns, competently handled, but dooming the accelerator to life on a face button. Cars have a good sense of individual character, and aircraft make it easy to cause chaos

Smack My Glitch Up



Although *Saints Row 2* is constantly striving to make you laugh, as with the original, the funniest moments are reserved for the bugs. While there's considerably more polish on display than the first time around – no one's likely to write a musical about this game – it's still mildly amusing to see an elderly jogger calmly trample over the corpse of a cop you've just beaten to death outside your house. Less amusing is the oncoming traffic that occasionally fades out of existence as it approaches, or the random moments when innocently bumping into a lamppost while parking launches your car gymnastically through the air and into a lake.

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WIPEOUT HD

FORMAT: PS3 RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: SCE
DEVELOPER: SONY LIVERPOOL PREVIOUSLY IN: E188

Wipeout was once Sony's proud flagship, its iconic ships the symbols that ushered in the age of modern mainstream gaming. But its latest incarnation is reduced to being a polished remix of previous PSP outings. And yet it's resplendent with detail and vibrancy: each of *WHD*'s eight tracks is a shimmering, 1080p rhapsody, played at an unwavering 60fps.

The feel and heft of your craft is beautifully responsive. The analogue triggers enable deliciously subtle air brakes to ease your jet-propelled bobsled around corners. Less responsive is the invaluable sideways shunt, activated by a double-tap of a trigger, but due to the huge amount of give and the imprecise biting point, it isn't natural and instinctive unless you change the mapping to the higher digital triggers.

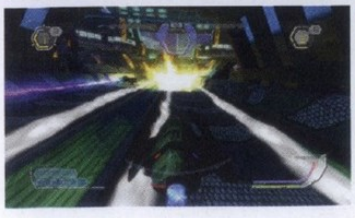
The tracks might be familiar to fans of *Pure* and *Pulse* but the HD makeover freshens them, with courses at higher classes becoming dangerous and undulating living things. The gentle curves of Vineta K, for example, rapidly become savage as the throttle opens up. Mastering a tricky switchback or chicane is matched only by the near-euphoric speed rush that results from skilful piloting.



Sebenco Climb, Chenghou Project, Vineta K and Sol 2 from *Pure* are joined by expansion pack tracks Ubermall and Anulpha Pass. *Pulse* offers up Moa Therma and Metropia. Classic tracks, like Terminal from *Wipeout 3* or *2097*'s Gare D'Europa, are high on our DLC wishlist

The singleplayer campaign is a series of ruthlessly testing challenges that include races, time trials, speed laps and Zone – a survival mode introduced in *Fusion*. There's also the Racebox, in which players can create their own playlists of tracks and events, plus an eightplayer online option. But, still, the only spanner in *WHD*'s otherwise race-tuned engine is its brevity. After a few days, the eight reversible tracks feel over-familiar. But for £12 (or $20), *WHD* is great value – even if it doesn't so much scratch the itch left by the series' long console absence as irritate it. *WHD* gives enough to excite but not satisfy. **[8]**







Some layouts can feel a little 'small' – the Anulpha Pass circuit, for example, is all but a ring road – but overall there's a fine sense of scale to these remastered offerings



BAJA: EDGE OF CONTROL

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PS3 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: THQ DEVELOPER: 2XL GAMES PREVIOUSLY IN: E189



It's easy to dismiss subtitles as inconsequential rhetoric, but in *Baja*'s case, THQ could scarcely have chosen a better slogan to sum up the experience at its core. *Baja* is as much about anticipating vehicles' airborne behaviour as it is managing the vagaries of terra firma, and with so much time spent in the air – and at the whim of dead weight and momentum – '*Edge Of Control*' seems unusually apt. Sadly, despite tactile handling and largely plausible surface physics, *Baja* feels insubstantial as a complete package.

Visually, the game is stunted by its own ambition. In order to represent the famed Baja endurance races with anything approaching authenticity, this is, by necessity, an open-world racer. This combination of acres of land and mammoth draw distances has taken a severe toll on fidelity: tracks are vast expanses of barren scrub, with few landmarks to anchor the player in the world or help differentiate one environment from another. With some of the point-to-point events lasting three hours at a minimum, divided into 20-minute legs, players are in danger of slipping in to a meditative trance from sustained focus on the undulating, serpentine ribbon of dirt that their vehicle consumes. Hypnotic, perhaps, but not especially compelling. Worse, with no opportunity to save between sections, the entire rally must be completed in a single sitting.



Hillclimbs provide the most extreme terrain, but ultimately are more of a novelty than a matter of skill. Even the AI struggles to land its vehicle in any state other than a heap of mangled wreck

Such repetitive scenery provides little motivation to endure a simplistic, bare-bones career mode. Nor does the sheer difficulty curve, which bats newcomers away with utterly merciless AI competition even in the initial leagues, and little in the way of advice. *Baja*'s offroad racers are satisfying once the narrow boundaries of that titular, knife-edge balance have been established, but the learning process can be a torrid parade of shattered suspension and crumpled panels.

Ultimately, the visceral pleasure of the driving model, and the accompanying selection of stentorian engine notes, isn't enough to maintain interest in the face of the featureless expanses that players are given to negotiate. Codemasters would do well to take note: it's not the size of your world that counts, it's what you're capable of filling it with. **[5]**



***Baja* makes little use of its vast environments. While there is a freeplay mode, there are no point-to-point races across open landscape, and freedom of choice is limited to a few circuits**



MEGA MAN 9

FORMAT: 360, PS3 (VERSION TESTED), WII
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: CAPCOM DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

Mega Man could be described as 'versatile.' This is a character that has appeared in over 120 games that range over go-karts, football, fighters, boardgames, strategy, and even the odd platformer for old times' sake. It's not small beer: Mega Man is responsible for more of Capcom's income than *Resident Evil* and *Street Fighter* combined.

Rather odd, then, that the main series hasn't seen an instalment since the SNES. So the first phase of Capcom's comprehensive exploration of its IP in the downloadable marketplace arguably ends with this game, the bravest of them all in being designed for the capabilities of the NES. It's not simply a retro visual style – outside of the resolution, this game contains no situation, effect or enemy that could not have been achieved on that hardware. There's even a 'Legacy Mode' in the options menu that lets you turn sprite flicker on and off.

It will be divisive. For every moment when the restrictions force something inventive from the designers, there's a spike trap. For all the flights of fancy squeezed from such a small palette, there's some rote learning of attack patterns. Clever enemy design goes hand-in-hand with cheap enemy design, and liberating stretches of platforming are nearly always brought to an end with instant death.



Galaxy Man's stage has paired-up teleporters that shoot Mega Man a few feet vertically, a beautiful little flourish that is reused and remixed several times throughout the level

As homage to bygone days, this is exceptional. Out of context, it appears less impressive. *Mega Man 9* might try to fit in the 'retro cool' category, but really it's just retro: and that's much less of a safe bet than *Space Invaders* T-shirts and *Pac-Man* keyrings. The good and the bad aside, though, there is one thing it indisputably shows. They sure as hell don't make 'em like they used to. **[6]**

The last level is split into four sections and must be the source of much evil cackling at Capcom Japan, as it's a masochist's robotic spiky dream





CAPTAIN RAINBOW

FORMAT: WII RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBA (UK, US)
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: SKIP PREVIOUSLY IN: E193



Winning over the *Famicom Wars* troops with a spot of volleyball is one of a few minigames. Another deals with a workout for an overweight Little Mac

An island of forgotten Nintendo heroes? With the company's ever-increasing focus on mascot-free lifestyle titles, it's not hard to imagine such a commune actually existing. Whether it too will have a Captain Rainbow to buff up the faded stars is another matter.

In Skip's continuing study into generosity and old-fashioned elbow grease, the literal polishing in *Chibi-Robo* becomes Rainbow's metaphorical dusting off of pitiful characters. The residents of Mimin Island have issues, and Nick (Rainbow's alter ego) helps out with rudimentary fetch quests. By removing restrictions on Nick's movements – no *Chibi*-esque battery here – the pace is sedate and *Rainbow* can feel like a shallow point'n'click adventure. And its reams of dialogue make it largely import-unfriendly.

Rainbow's appearance signals a more traditional challenge. Nourished by the island's fruits, he can bash through obstacles and fight off gloopy intruders who would prove lethal to Nick. Collecting star fragments enables him to grant a wish to a resident, so long as he doesn't lose it to a monster in a simple reaction-time battle. A bitty experience, sure, but one anchored on a beautiful idea: will you use the star to reinvigorate Rainbow's own fading TV career, or free a dusty Nintendo icon from the isle?

In a time when Nintendo seems quite settled on its 'acceptable' character roster, a line-up seen in any *Mario Kart* or *Baseball*, a celebration of the stars of yesteryear seems rather odd. While there is a disappointing irony in the decision not to bring *Captain Rainbow* to the west – a rally against obscurity sinking into obscurity – that he even exists in this landscape of brain training and virtual dogs is reason to be cheerful. **[7]**





The thick inky lines recall *Okami*'s calligraphy style, but the vibrant colour palette and comic-book 'WHAMS!' and 'POWS!' are entirely Skip's own, even if the latter do bring to mind Adam West in tights

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FLOWER, SUN AND RAIN

FORMAT: DS RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: RISING STAR
DEVELOPER: GRASSHOPPER MANUFACTURE

Reading something like a tropical reinterpretation of Twin Peaks by way of Groundhog Day, Goichi Suda's newly translated 2001 mystery game, *Flower, Sun And Rain*, is set in a world even more indulgent of its creator's perverse imagination than that of the excellent *No More Heroes*. The game follows the tribulations of likeably incompetent sleuth Sumio Mondo as he relives the same day over and over in an attempt to prevent a terrorist blowing up a plane, but whose ambitions are derailed by a succession of increasingly eccentric encounters.

As a script, *Flower, Sun And Rain* is, for at least two thirds, hugely witty and effortlessly mad, eliciting enough regular laughs to cover for the game's otherwise painfully tedious forms of interaction. But as any notional gesture towards a cogent plot unravels, the game gives you less and less incentive to continue – and in fact mocks you for doing so. Characters frequently launch postmodern assaults on the fourth wall, pointing out the game's clunky mechanics, audiovisual failings and the near-negligible level of challenge from the puzzles – all of which are limited to a numerical input and rarely derived from an act of logic. Players need only refer to the island's guidebook, flipping through until the subject at hand presents itself, then scanning the page for a tangentially related figure. When faced with one of the many unnecessary journeys from one side of the island to the other, involving between five and 15 minutes of walking, the player is goaded by the observation that it'll be hard on the legs. "Can't I just warp there or something?" asks Mondo plaintively. Would that we could, Mr Mondo.



All credit to the translators, but Suda's writing and great comic timing sparkle. Clicking through hundreds of lines of dialogue a few words at a time is not an ideal reading experience, however

There's more than a touch of *Penn & Teller's Smoke And Mirrors* in the game's mischief – and, for a brief time, it is strangely amusing to be a participant in your own ridicule. But while the game's sadistic ineptness might be part of the point, it rarely feels like much of a consolation. **[4]**

***FS&R* takes a turn into the incomprehensible in its last third, diluting its humour with increasingly surreal non-sequiturs. As troublemaking character Shoutaro predicts, without the game's thin veneer of mystery, 'all that will be left is a bunch of disjointed in-jokes'**



SONIC CHRONICLES: THE DARK BROTHERHOOD

FORMAT: DS RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SEGA DEVELOPER: BIOWARE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E189





Attack phases include two rounds of actions, an unwise move that asks you to predict a whole two turns of enemy actions

How do you craft an RPG around a character defined entirely by movement? We're not sure that you can, and BioWare hasn't proved otherwise. *Sonic Chronicles* is an RPG based on the fat that Sega added to the initially lean hedgehog meat: the sidekicks, the attitude, the melodrama. Bar context-sensitive actions that see Sonic and co perform sprints and loop-the-loops – meaningless passive acts – this is a *Sonic* game in looks alone.



This running minigame (tap to jump obstacles) is both a benefit and a bane – great for fleeing nastier foes, not great when they flee from you

That said, it's not a bad game. For while Sonic's essence is distilled, what remains is a satisfying grab-bag of mechanics and ideas from other, better titles. *Ouendan*'s touchscreen cues turn battling into a tight, focused affair, the moves needed to survive the smart difficulty curve available only in exchange for timed taps and swipes. Partner attacks, borrowed from *Mario & Luigi*, add emphasis to team selection, strong characters given the heave-ho for the greater good.

The sluggish first half of the game makes way for stronger material, again with the arrival of more non-hedgehog involvement. A trip into space sees BioWare much more at home. Alien factions and oppressive hive-minds may not be *Sonic*, but they're twice as interesting. And by mere association, our hero becomes more interesting: no longer a solo sprinter, but the leader of an oddball squad on a grand quest.

While it's a shame that BioWare couldn't find its feet until halfway through the game, persevere and *Chronicles*' tale will amount to something that makes this a little harder to begrudge. **[6]**



DISGAEA 3: ABSENCE OF JUSTICE

FORMAT: PS3 RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN, US), TBC (EUROPE)
PUBLISHER: ATLUS (US), SQUARE ENIX (EUROPE)
DEVELOPER: NIPPON ICHI PREVIOUSLY IN: E186



Elements of the previous games have a new lick of paint – the Classroom replaces the Dark Assembly, and comes with some excellent new members of staff

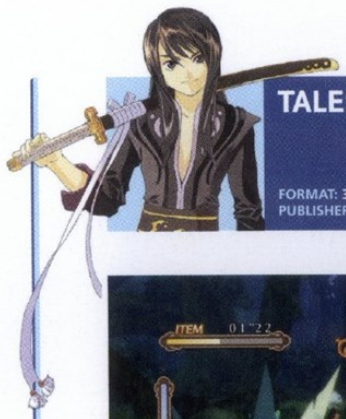
All literature may be reducible to seven plots, but RPGs can be boiled down to one: the struggle of the isolated individual to make some numbers get a little bit higher. *Disgaea* is perhaps the purest RPG series in existence. It never loses sight of the numbers. Everything in the game is bent towards helping the player understand the potential that exists for the bolstering, manipulation and multiplication of its characters' statistics.

The fact that *Disgaea* has always been one of the most characterful of RPGs, and that *Disgaea 3* is perhaps the finest of its self-referential and casually wicked yarns, is almost an irrelevance. We've got numbers to think about. The opportunities for doing so are bamboozling, simply because there are so many options: concerns familiar from the game's predecessors are multiplied by the addition of the likes of Magichange, the opportunity to combine monsters with human characters to create powerful weapons for a limited number of rounds (but only effective if the monsters are of comparable levels). At a stroke, this makes monster-levelling a more pressing concern than it ever was in the PS2 games – and adds another pressing concern to your party-shaping.

The most important new addition in this context is the Class World – ten floors of enemies that are worth double the usual exp and mana, with further clearing bonuses of exp and HL (the game's currency). But although additions like this show a bloody-minded focus on refining *Disgaea*'s core, in succeeding it also makes itself more recondite than ever. For the initiated, however, this is heaven and, finally, a justification for all those hours spent in maths lessons. **[8]**



The graphics hardly stretch the PS3 hardware's capacity, the sprites in particular yearning for a higher-resolution treatment. But they're functional enough, and you may be happy without the distraction



TALES OF VESPERIA

FORMAT: 360 RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN, US), SPRING (EUROPE)
PUBLISHER: BANDAI NAMCO DEVELOPER: NAMCO TALES STUDIO



While in the recent past Square Enix has felt the need to refit and reshape its own major RPG franchise, Namco's equivalent standard-bearer exists in much the same form today as it did when it first appeared. Complaints about the regurgitation of gameplay and structure across a series of this nature are only really valid if they have a negative effect on the experience, and that's certainly not the case here. After all, an established rule-set can allow designers to concentrate on the fundamentally important aspects of the genre: plotting, writing, world building and characterisation.

This is both *Vesperia*'s strength and what sets it apart from its peers. Its characters may initially seem to be lazy stereotypes, but they soon blossom into something deeper, thanks to intelligent writing and uncommonly naturalistic acting. This is particularly true of Yuri, the protagonist of the piece, who manages to be sardonic, heroic, flawed and yet remain utterly compelling. No Squall Leonheart-style meaningfully moody silences to break the connection between the lead role and the player here.



Despite frequently being an astonishingly pretty game, the reliance on the in-game visuals for the majority of cutscenes is a slight shame, lacking the impact of those (too few, too short) provided by anime house Production IG

The confident characterisation drives the plot forwards smoothly, to the extent that it's a number of hours before a worldwide threat is even hinted at. You're instead working to small-scale, personal agendas that ultimately mean that this epic is built around individual stories. A large cast of NPCs flits in and out of proceedings, plot strands are introduced briefly and left dangling for hours without the player even realising, and all the time you're effortlessly drawn further into the world.

The flow is aided by realtime battles that remain enjoyable through being non-random, and a proliferation of health and life restoratives which, partnered with a difficulty setting that can be altered mid-game, minimises frustration. But that's all part of *Tales*' proven rule-set. The effort in creating this game has been spent elsewhere, and that's what makes it shine. **[8]**





As usual, the realtime battles play out like a simplified *Power Stone* without the environment elements. They're imprecise, but boisterous fun



LEGENDARY

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PC, PS3
RELEASE: OCTOBER 31 (360), NOVEMBER (PC, PS3)
PUBLISHER: ATARI/GAMECOCK DEVELOPER: SPARK UNLIMITED

The shooter is a broad church. *BioShock* and *Half-Life 2* may have wowed with literary smarts and engaging characters, but there will always be games to remind us that the cost of admission is just the possession of a gun and something to point it at. But, as *Legendary* warns, if the very pinnacle of your ambition is to make a game in which you shoot griffons in the face, you had better ensure that this basic action is soundly implemented.

Legendary gets some of it right: the mythical beasties themselves, released into modern-day New York by the accidental opening of Pandora's Box, are tightly designed and animated. Unfortunately, shooting them just isn't particularly exciting. Part of the problem lies with pacing, as the game chooses to leave you dismally underpowered for the first few hours, but the larger issues are that control is lumpen and your arsenal feeble. In the 360 version, simply the act of turning is defective, periodically sticking and vastly impairing your ability to react. Though you can't jump more than six inches from the ground, running and jumping propels you huge distances horizontally – a combination that doesn't recommend the game's platforming sections.

The game picks up after the first two chapters, however, when it eases the grip of scripting that constricts the player during the opening. The dev team has an eye for spectacle – a towering golem comprised of cars and other metallic detritus is a visual highlight – but these moments mostly serve to illustrate how dull your actual actions are by contrast. Nonetheless, the artists' competence shines through: the environments can be surprisingly beautiful when the game dares to venture out of subways and sewers. It's just a pity that these glimpses of ingenuity are in a game that otherwise attempts to do the very bare minimum in terms of interaction, and sometimes doesn't even manage that. **[4]**

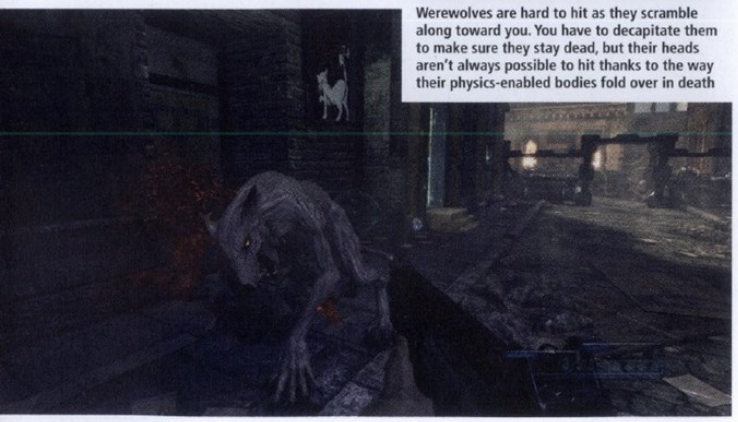




The Nari are some of the most effective enemies in the game – flitting ghostly shapes that will giggle like mischievous children as they pluck up your companions and toss them into rotating fan-blades or possess objects to hurl at you



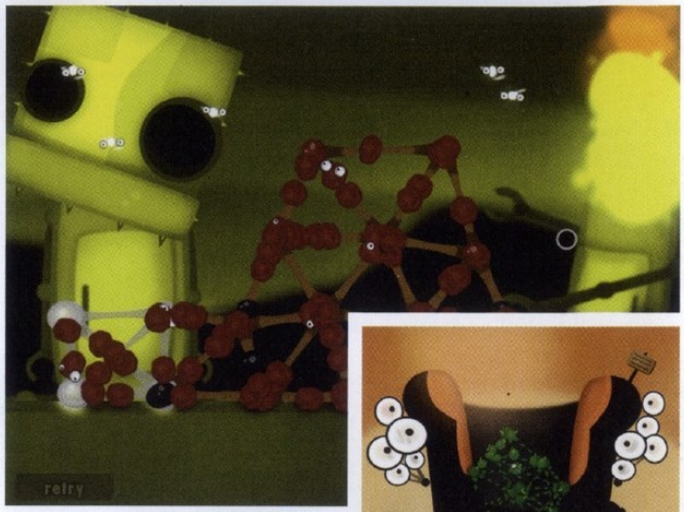
Werewolves are hard to hit as they scramble along toward you. You have to decapitate them to make sure they stay dead, but their heads aren't always possible to hit thanks to the way their physics-enabled bodies fold over in death



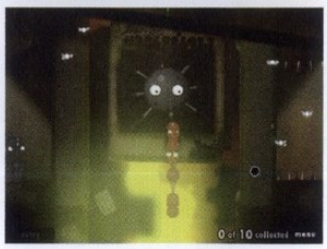


WORLD OF GOO

FORMAT: PC (VERSION TESTED), WII
RELEASE: NOVEMBER (US), TBC (UK)
PUBLISHER: 2D BOY DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



Beyond the brutal difficulty of its later levels, each stage contains Obsession Completion Distinction Criteria for finishing with more balls or fewer moves



True to its roots and fantastically planned, the original *Tower Of Goo* here comes as a networked metagame which pits you against the world to build the tallest tower from your balls

The question with *World Of Goo* was never one of the appeal of its underlying mechanics. 2D Boy co-founder Kyle Gabler's original *Tower Of Goo* proved an essential freeware download (Internet Game of the Month in E149) and the hallmark of the Experimental Gameplay Project he helped found, as it took the staid engineering delight of *Bridge Builder* and *Pontifex* (and, subsequently, *Elefunk*) and infused it down to its very rivets with anthropomorphic charm and soul.

Instead, *World Of Goo*'s prospects hinged on how well the upstart's debut title could string together its sprightly tar balls into a larger, wobbling framework worthy of full commercial release – and the answer, put simply, is that it does it phenomenally well.

Rather than employing the strategy of other indies-gone-retail and expanding itself on volumes of otherwise one-note sandbox play, the formerly EA-employed 2D Boy has taken a page from *Portal*'s playbook and woven its physical challenges into a hilariously ludicrous allegorical autobiography of creatives breaking free from the grey machinations of monolithic game industry megacorps.

Oozing with an organic fluidity that seeps into every interaction and stage design, and building with perfect pitch with the introduction of its varied ball types, the game crescendos toward some of the most meticulously – and near-sadistically – concocted challenges before introducing a game-changer in its fourth act that smartly brings a fresh gust of levity precisely when you wonder just how long it can hold its tune.

The game comes closest to faltering in cases where the challenge brings together perilous balance and fast reaction – its autonomous balls can't always be relied upon to be immediately at your fingertips, or can be too closely clustered to make selection unnecessarily difficult – but it's just that vitality that gives it its seductive tension. Masterfully done, and certainly set to become an instant Wii and PC cult hit. **[8]**



TRACKMANIA DS

FORMAT: DS RELEASE: NOVEMBER 14
PUBLISHER: FOCUS HOME INTERACTIVE
DEVELOPER: FIREBRAND GAMES PREVIOUSLY IN: E194

It's *TrackMania* on a DS, and it works brilliantly. The remaining 200 words or so are pretty much redundant now, but this game tends to get you excited. The most remarkable thing is how smoothly it runs: a flawless 60 frames a second that makes any caveats about the slightly pixellated visuals disappear in the wind. The zip in *TrackMania*'s distinctive drag racers, rally cars and 4x4s makes other DS racers look like golf buggies.

The structure remains unchanged: racing through a few rounds of the singleplayer tracks gives you enough Coppers (the in-game currency) to begin buying the fancier elements for the track editor, as well as further unlockable tracks. The 100-plus courses of singleplayer begin simply, before building up with a real flair for the fancy jumps and wall climbing that are *TrackMania*'s magic touch. Despite some streamlining of the types of courses – down to a racetrack, desert and off-road trinity – they manage to showcase almost all of the basic possibilities for level building.



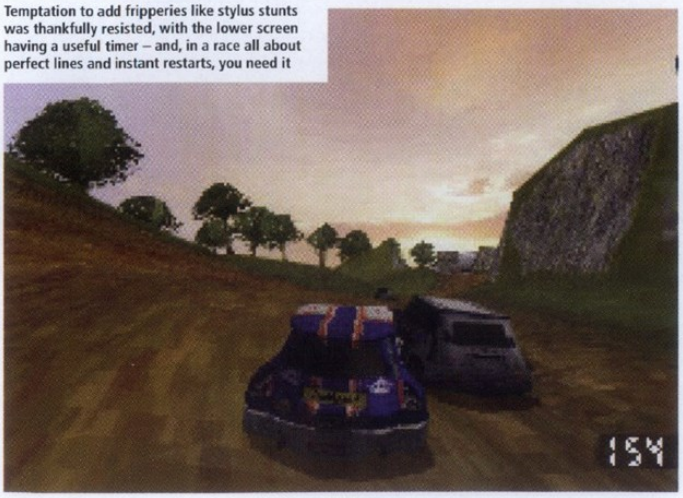
The multiplayer sees well-assembled groups of challenges that inevitably lead to therapeutic group cheering and swearing in equal measure

The track editor is as robust as ever, and it's easy to produce simple courses in a few minutes. There's a slight element of fiddliness to the touchscreen at times, and although the memory capacity allows up to 60 tracks, it's not possible to build gargantuan monsters. Like the absence of ghost data, however, it's an entirely understandable omission in the context of *TrackMania DS*'s great technical achievement in translating the core of the series unblemished. For racing on DS, there's nothing to compare, in either depth or style. **[8]**





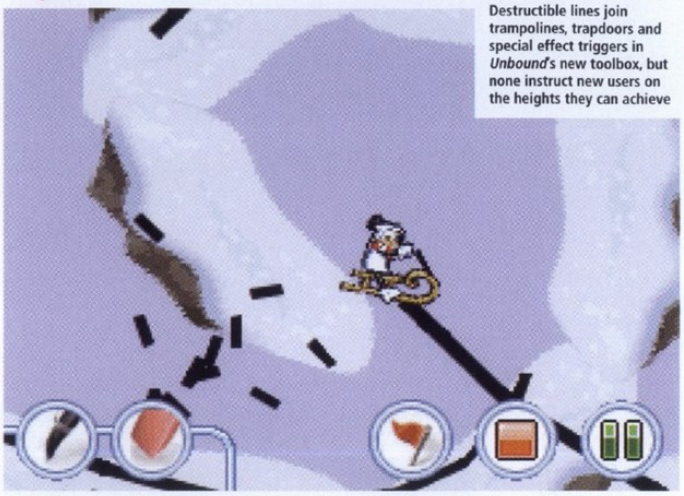
Temptation to add fripperies like stylus stunts was thankfully resisted, with the lower screen having a useful timer – and, in a race all about perfect lines and instant restarts, you need it





LINE RIDER 2: UNBOUND

FORMAT: DS RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBC (UK)
PUBLISHER: GENIUS PRODUCTS DEVELOPER: INXILE



Destructible lines join trampolines, trapdoors and special effect triggers in *Unbound*'s new toolbox, but none instruct new users on the heights they can achieve

Though a direct comparison of the two would be unfair, in many ways *Line Rider 2* faced the same dilemma as 2D Boy's *World Of Goo* (see p98): how do you take a hit freeware downloadable and expand it to a full retail release?

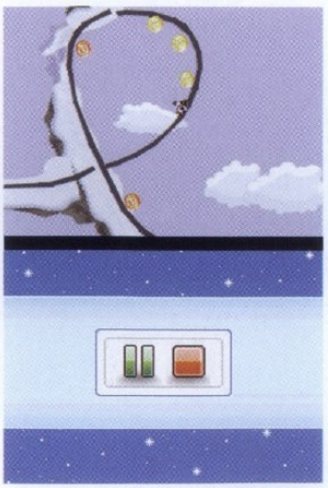
InXile's answer, to add pre-set story mode challenges, might seem an obvious one, but in practice brings the game to the kind of crashing halt seen in so many of its hastily drawn loops. To ease the player into learning both its creation tools and the larger laws of its universe, InXile has created increasingly complex levels but deleted large swaths of track, leaving players to fill in the gaps.

At the same time, though, the tools in its free-draw mode that make even the simplest YouTube-dazzling tricks possible – primarily a flag that allows quick bookmarks for specific bits to be fine tuned – have also been stripped, making the entirety of the story mode a lurching, halting back-and-forth of draw and redraw, each time blindly hoping that shifting a few tedious pixels will have the intended consequence.

But the true appeal of *Line Rider* lies in the creativity of the users, and InXile should be lauded for one of the most robust online community setups to grace Nintendo's handheld, enabling users to link the DS game to a web profile, where they can browse and queue tracks for later download.

And yet, for the format that should have been the most natural way to bring a track to life, even the currently uploaded creations amount to little more than chicken scratches that, while resulting in a technically impressive set of sled-grinds, come nowhere near the impossibly complex beauty of the PC oeuvre.

This may well change as users learn to exploit the limitations of the platform, but *Unbound* ultimately remains an unwelcoming title for the novices it hoped its grand makeover would reach. **[5]**



Story mode rewards daring drawing with gold tokens redeemed for unlockable prizes, but sometimes just finishing a track is sweet relief


PC Gamer
DOOM

TIME EXTEND

DOOM 3

FORMAT: **MAC, PC, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **ACTIVISION**
DEVELOPER: **ID SOFTWARE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **2003**

As life on Mars resumed after a decade, was id Software still the master of Doom, or its slave?

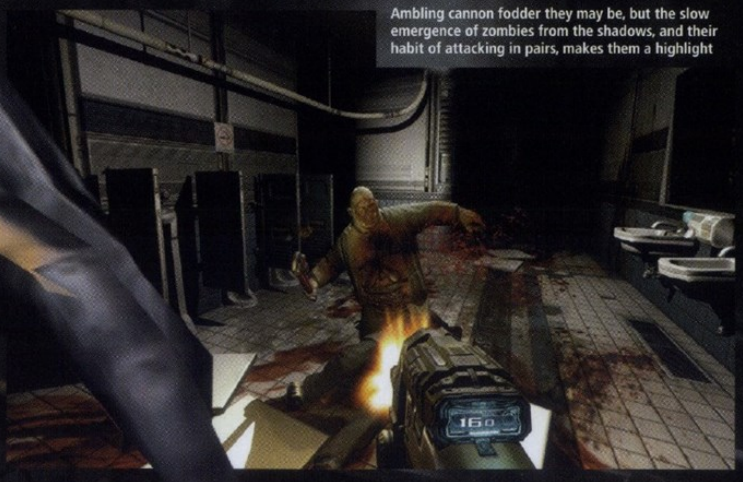
Ask a random gamer, PC owner or not, for opinions of *Doom* and you'll be lucky if you get one. Ask them for memories and you'll get a dozen. Even those who've never shot the barrel and turned the imp into pixel mush remember it as if they had, its greatness written in lost man-hours, failed exams, smuggled serial cables and soiled pyjamas. Little wonder, then, that creator id Software chose to apply that legendary brand, almost a decade later, to a game that arguably didn't need it.

As recently as this year's QuakeCon, designer **Tim Willits** and id CEO **Todd Hollenshead** have leapt, fiercely at times, to the defence of their studio's biggest commercial hit. "There are three people on the internet that keep making these posts that *Doom 3* was 'bad'," said Hollenshead in July, "and they get no credibility from any other people. There's some mass misperception out there." Then Willits, a month later: "Games that sell over three-and-a-half million copies are not bad games."

They're right, of course. Statistically, the three-million-and-rising club is something of a critical elite. And, yes, there are people out there who found the game difficult, whose opinions have since decayed into the kind of dismissive grunts Hollenshead describes.

Doom 3 was meticulously plotted, winching players to the precipice with a great opening act, then plunging them into cramp-inducing terror

Doom 3 was a kludge, part FPS, part survival horror, part modern and part anachronism. As a rollercoaster, it was meticulously plotted, winching players to the precipice with a great opening act, then plunging them into cramp-inducing terror before retrieving them, often with as literal a device as a carriage on rails, back into their comfort zone. And as an environmental mind-game it was ruthless, able to regulate pressure as strictly as a Martian airlock to a point where you could almost feel its grip around the lungs. But somewhere in



Ambling cannon fodder they may be, but the slow emergence of zombies from the shadows, and their habit of attacking in pairs, makes them a highlight



SPACE ODDITY

No one could hear you scream, perhaps, but one question travelled pretty damn far from the space around Mars: was *Doom 3* a good-looking game or wasn't it? To answer, you have to consider the two types of realism offered by the game and its ancestor. In *Doom*, every time the hand reached up to pump the shotgun, the effect was immediate and undeniable. Moreover, the worst a gamer could do to it was shrink the screen to the size of a beermat. *Doom 3*'s, however, was a realism expressed better by terms like 'normal mapping' and 'per-pixel lighting' than the images it put on screen. Passed through the prism of wide-ranging hardware configurations, it suffered from texture compression and angular geometry, called out frequently online. Today's hardware, mods and .ini tweaks, however, bring it much closer to id's vision.

the mix, things got slightly messy – something often put down to a 'funhouse' approach that stems exclusively from 1993.

The analogy was, you suspect, never designed to make *Doom 3* a better game so much as a compatible one – a rightful heir to the chainsaw, the fist and that hair-metal grimoire of zombies, Cacodemons and biomechanical titans. 'Boo!' was its motto – and what better template, it figured, than the dangling skeletons and Jack-in-the-boxes of a mechanical ghost house. Ask many what they remember of this *Doom*, though, and they'll recall a game so spring-loaded you could almost hear it creak. They might even boil it down to one recurring scene. A pile of ammo sits in an alcove black with impenetrable shadow. Knowing the outcome, you reload what you can and prepare to jog the mouse wheel through an increasingly desperate arsenal. You grab the pickup, the place glows red with Satanic glyphs, and you backpedal through weapons and corridors until the ambushing creatures are well and truly dead. Then, somewhere around the next corner, the trap resets.

Fun? Many insist that it is. Some will even call you names – nasty internet names, no less – for not jumping on that trigger, diving into the shadows, chomping the ears off those commie bastards and spitting them into the sky. Those with a milder taste for red meat tend to sit on the fence, paying due respect to some very well-manufactured – but manufactured nonetheless – terror. Others, though, find the relentless, mathematical precision of the whole thing annoying, and eventually numbing. Hitchcock said something about anticipation being better than a bang. Whatever your opinion, you have to concede there's bang by the truckload here.

If it isn't in your face, throwing the camera every which way with claws or teeth, the game's behind you, throwing the camera every which way with claws or teeth. Or it's bowling fireballs, launching homing missiles and diving across the room in less time than it takes to pull the trigger. It has a casual disregard for the time between visual and physical contact – a time in which many of the best horrors enjoy so much of their action. It's the time in which *Resident Evil 4* teaches you to fear its enemies but also admire their cunning. *Silent Hill* has you marvel at the bizarre and despair at the tools you've been given. *BioShock* lets you watch its society tear itself apart before its eyes turn on you. And *Dead Space*, this month's unlikely genre star, makes you do the lot, mixing things up to make a copycat game unique. The biggest issue in *Doom 3* isn't that you're given too little time to recover and reset before the next big scare – it's that you've too little time to fight.

But consider the circumstances. This was, like id games often are, a leap into darkness in more ways than one. It was a launch title, effectively.

Doom 3's modding community has, if anything, increased its productivity over time, 2008 seeing an explosion of hi-res textures, HDR and new effects backported from games like *Prey* and *Quake Wars*

Some enemies never really evolved to make use of the new game's interiors and visual effects, instead sticking to their pre-existing guns. Perhaps it was too much to expect strategic use of the shadows beyond the initial spawn







John Carmack, who superstitiously clings to the role of deskbound engineer but is actually company president, can never quite know what id's designers have in mind, just as his own thoughts are communicated largely through science. What emerges from that relationship is a congruence of art, design and technology far more volatile than developers further down the food chain experience. Here, it produced an extraordinary gamble: a lighting system so extreme that anything not immediately adjacent to a light source was plunged into total darkness.

Usually, it's a modder's job to do something as crazy as strip almost all the ambient lighting from a game, and at times *Doom 3* feels more like an artistic statement than a functioning firstperson shooter. But returning to it after years of day/night cycles, incremental naturalism and hollow promises from DirectX 10 – and if Steam's regular deals on id's entire back catalogue don't entice you, the upcoming open source version leaves little excuse – what shines in the dark is the game's cinematography, a towering balancing act of vision and resources. Not one object has been placed randomly or in haste – because it couldn't be. Every flickering lamp, touchscreen panel, muzzle-flash, fireball or sweep of the torch demands more triangles from graphics cards which, at the time, didn't have triangles to spare. Before even a fart emerged from the bowels of Hell, the logistics must have been spine-chilling.



What shines is the cinematography, a towering balancing act of vision and resources. Not one object has been placed randomly or in haste

A shame, then, that so much of that intricacy was dismantled. There was the last-minute breakdown of id's relationship with Nine Inch Nails frontman Trent Reznor, due to deliver an ambitious 'soundscape' to rival *Quake*'s, not to mention a substantial body of sound effects. Replacing them was a bulimic, surreal array of gunshot noises and a single, lacklustre theme tune – problems compounded by the patent wrangle with Creative over the 'Carmack's Reverse' stencil shadowing method, which cost the game (initial) support for the popular EAX audio system. Later would come the 'no duct tape on Mars' complaint, because you couldn't dual-wield your one reliable light source: the torch. Within weeks there were mods for extra lights, effectively yanking out the game's heart yet seen by many as essential given its constant, vicious combat.

It begs an awkward question: how good could *Doom 3* have been had it not been *Doom 3*? Dismantle the booby-traps, close the portals and leave the chainsaw in the '90s, and what kind of game could id Tech 4 have built? You don't have to look far: it's in there, interrupted and obscured by the action. Shortly after release, Hollenshead described the game's four scares: tension, surprise, physical revulsion and atmosphere. But there's a fifth it does best of all: captivity. Not as exultant as Rapture, as haunting as *System Shock 2*'s Von Braun or as lonely as *Dead Space*'s Ishimura, the UAC Mars facility is still one of the great pressure-cookers, with strengths beyond any Hell Knight or Arch-Vile.

Bringing to mind the movie Outland, in which another space-bound mining colony goes out of its mind (and the odd airlock), it proves that man is quite capable of making his own hell without some poxy artefact. Its rooms and corridors are an incomprehensible dungeon of machinery. Its windows, a potential form of mental escape, only serve to imprison you further with views of Martian rock, just as Rapture uses the ocean floor. Its PDAs, billboards and amusements pitch homeworld optimism against grim reality. And in one standout scene, you're popped out of an airlock into the open 'air', only to find a quarry no larger than a sound stage, your oxygen tanks forcing you back inside. A game, you could say, of disastrous escapes.

For a society, such confinement unlocks greater scares than Hell can provide: madness, betrayal, murder and despair. The sense of it is palpable in id's game, and you expect to shine torchlight upon it at every turn. But because this is *Doom 3*, home of the chainsaw and the BFG, the horrors always come from without, the madness through demonic possession. A few shades of grey, you feel, could have darkened its world even further. Instead, the real terror lies solely in videos, emails and maybe a game that could never have been. Not with that title, anyway.

THE MAKING OF...
MAX PAYNE

From Manhattan subways to Marky Mark: how Remedy kicked PC gaming into action

FORMAT: **PC, PS2, XBOX** PUBLISHER: **GOD (PC), ROCKSTAR (CONSOLE)** DEVELOPER: **REMEDY** ORIGIN: **FINLAND** RELEASE: **2001 (2002, PS2)**

From 2001 to 2003, it wasn't just a thirdperson camera that made the world revolve around Max Payne. Nor was it the mere sight of its excellent graphics, or of PCs taking a sideways leap into console land from where they would never fully return. More than anything, it was the man. A propulsive thriller made by just two dozen people in Espoo, Finland – a "garage band", according to writer **Sam Lake** – it was the story of a man imploding. The door opened on that scene of devastation, the wife and newborn child slaughtered by drug addicts, and in one New York minute gaming had acquired a new thirst for revenge.

"For me, the starting point was this archetype of the private eye, the hard-boiled cop," says Lake, whose portrait need never be printed so long as Max, for reasons you either know already or will soon learn, appears in a screenshot. "The team wanted images and ideas seen in countless action and crime movies, even in pop culture generally. Just something that hadn't been seen much in games."

"John Woo had this action where all this trash was flying in the air – we just wanted that style," says programming lead **Olli Tervo**. "Lots of things had to be happening."

"One of the first things we did technologically was the particle system," adds **Sami Vanhatalo**, the game's lead technical artist. "And once you started seeing the particle effects with this huge slowdown it was like: 'God, something good must come of this.'"

Lake, however, was concerned more with the bad – the creeping, contagious bad of a modern film noir. He wanted a "deeper, more psychological" story than existed in action games of the time, something preoccupied with both outer and inner turmoil, the city as well as its people. Much of what sets *Max Payne* apart today is the quite alien, Scandinavian air that rips through its New York streets, rapping on its windows as an impenetrable blizzard devours the skyline. Ragnarok, the Norse vision of the end of the world, was as natural an association, suggests Lake, as any squalid crack den or alleyway.

"Max's journey is a revenge story about a man who's been pushed so far into a mad, impossible situation that normal, everyday life has lost its meaning"

"Max's journey is a revenge story about a man who's been pushed so far into a mad, impossible situation that normal, everyday life has lost its meaning. It's disappeared. So you couldn't describe what was happening in that context – or at least Max couldn't. All that's left are archetypes and metaphors, monsters and demons. It becomes a myth. So it felt like the right thing to do to bring all those references to it." Plus, as we remind Lake, no small degree of comedy – not something you'd automatically find in discarded needles, dead babies and baseball bats. "We didn't want to *avoid* that over-the-top feel because the player is going to create comical situations in any case, always. Humour is a natural part of playing games and, as a writer, you're always trying to match the gameplay experience. If you're too serious about it, that simply doesn't happen."

Development of *Max Payne* spanned several years, with '96 and '97 seeing the leap from *Quake II*-era 3D accelerators to cards capable of, as Remedy would discover, near-photographic realism. Until technology intervened, the game was a more cartoony affair drawn entirely by hand. "But if we wanted to set the game in, say, some sleazy motel in New York, we needed some kind of reference," says Vanhatalo. "We'd already sent the art guys to some really nasty neighbourhoods with a couple of bodyguards, and then we realised that we had all these photos. Why not use them as the basis for our textures? There were a lot of art tricks you had to do to get those textures to work: getting all the unnecessary light information out, for example. But once we'd





BREAK-PADS

Vanhatalo's coffee isn't going down too well as we mention the first game's PS2 port. Recovering, he explains: "You could say that *Max Payne* would have fit much better on console from the start, but we were PC developers making the best of what we had. There's a lot of perfectly good thirdperson games that use controls that would've worked perfectly well back then, but the controls on PS2 left a lot to be desired. There's nothing wrong with the sticks, we just didn't have time to polish the controls."

"Rockstar's teams did such an amazing job squeezing about 200Mb of memory usage and a million memory allocations into PS2," says Mäki. "The ports were so technically challenging it reduced the time for anything else. This is partly why, while we can run *Alan Wake* on PC now, we don't have mouse and keyboard support yet. We're doing things from a different standpoint now. Doing it the other way round is the right way now."

decorated part of the game, everyone was like: 'Wow. *This* is what we've been trying to make.'"

Well, not quite everyone. To some, explains studio co-founder and development director **Markus Mäki**, the arrival of real-world textures felt less like the start of something than the end. "To them, you weren't an artist any more if you did something like that. But if you're basing things on the real world, it's just the sensible thing to do." Were there ever fears that it wouldn't work? "I don't think that was an option."

Lake had already pitched the idea of using graphic novel panels for the game's cutscenes, casting himself in several 'heavily Photoshopped' examples. But the advantages, says Mäki, already spoke for themselves: "With a graphic novel, the nuances are there in the head of the reader, and it would be much harder to reach that level with in-game or even prerendered cinematics. Now you can do that stuff believably; back then it was a different ball-game. And there was the other reason: production.

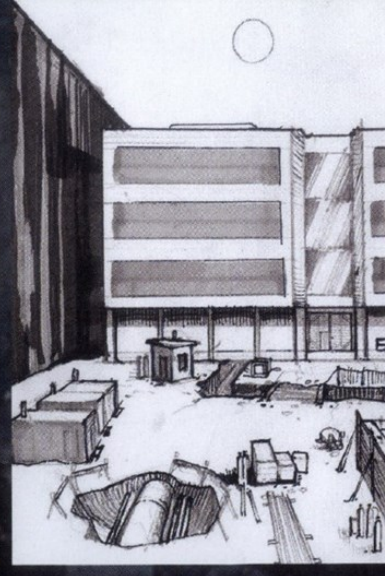


A lack of kung-fu action (given the eastern influences) was addressed by a hugely popular mod, Kung-Fu Edition. "That was brilliant," says Vanhatalo. "We were like: how is that *possible*?"





Who can forget Lords And Ladies, the fictional TV show that hogged the series' numerous TV sets (below)?



"We did a lot of streamlining and reorganisation of the story anyway – but once you had the graphic novels you could cut them up, put them on walls, follow the whole game and say: 'You know, that should really be there'. And in 30 seconds you'd made a dramatic plot change. Even if it meant redoing some of the imagery, you were talking a day or two instead of a week of doing cinematics."

Fans and critics know only too well, of course, the side-effect of Lake's proposal: a fourth-wall-shattering twist worthy of Stephen King, which saw the writer awake one morning to find he'd become his character. "We were still talking about this rise of photorealism and at the time it didn't feel like a big deal," he admits of having his own face wrapped around Max's polygonal chunk of a head. "With all these hand-painted pictures, no one would have recognised me anyway. Fast-forward a couple of years to the end of the project, though, when we're using photographs for all the textures in the game, and there I was. At that point, the idea might have given me pause."

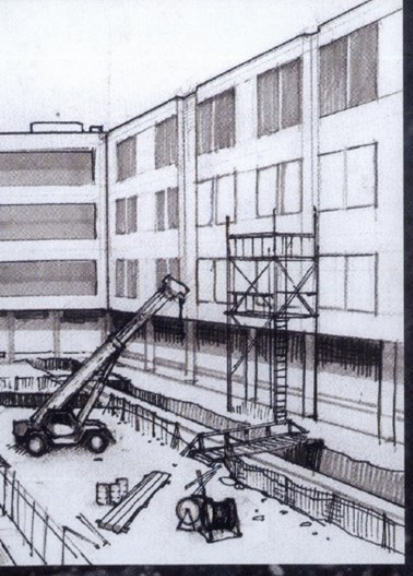
"I was walking home when a car stops in front of me. Two climb out and shout at me to stop. They proceed to ask me if I'm Max Payne; they want my autograph"

He insists it was fun, however, with his expanding role including casting many of his friends and relatives as the game's crooked line-up of cops, executives, politicians and thugs. "And if you look at us, we're not exactly Italian mobsters," admits Vanhatalo. "So we were like: 'Quick! Check out the guy delivering the pizzas. Get him over here for a while'." The game's credits, we're told, are a cornucopia of cousins, fathers and girlfriends, with the occasional industry figure tossed in. One is now CTO at AMD.

Is Lake recognised in the street? "At trade shows like E3, mostly, where I'd been doing countless demos of *Max Payne* or *Alan Wake*. There was this one time a couple of years ago when I was walking home from the office in Espoo; it's a nice neighbourhood, but the street was totally deserted apart from me and this car. It slows down and I see these four guys peering out of the window. Then it turns round, passes me again and stops in front of me. Two climb out and shout at me to stop, and by this time I'm nervous enough already. Then they proceed to ask me if I'm Max Payne; they want my autograph. It happens rarely, luckily enough. Finns are reserved people. We rarely talk to strangers.

"The whole thing did end up being quite a lot of work, though. That was one of the reasons I didn't want to do it for the sequel, because the schedule was much tighter and there was much more story. The screenplay of the first game was something like 150-160 pages – for the sequel it ended up being 600. It didn't make any sense to waste a month or more of precious writing time for those photo shoots again. First time around, we didn't have a choice."

A logical progression at a glance, with better physics, acting





The angular geometry and textures of an urban environment gelled with the abilities of the MAX-FX engine, the same barebones vibe employed by games like *The Darkness*







talent and the obligatory combo moves, *Max Payne 2* was an altogether different proposition for its creator. Take-Two's purchase of publisher The Gathering had muddied any prior relationship with Rockstar Games, whose interest had nonetheless produced valiant, difficult ports of the first *Max Payne* for consoles (see 'Break-pads'). Now, the obstructions were gone.

"They're a very eccentric company that works in strange ways," says Vanhatalo. "But surprisingly compatible. I don't recall a single instance where someone was trying to steer us into doing this when we really wanted to do that. We were on the same page the whole time."

"I do remember some *Stranglehold*-esque proposals from one of the Rockstar producers, for Mexican stand-offs, stuff like that. But the time really wasn't right," adds Mäki. "But we both wanted to go higher on the production values and be more ambitious with the story. They're straightforward and honest guys: they expect a lot but deliver a lot when you need them. After five years of working with them, I don't think anyone has anything bad to say."





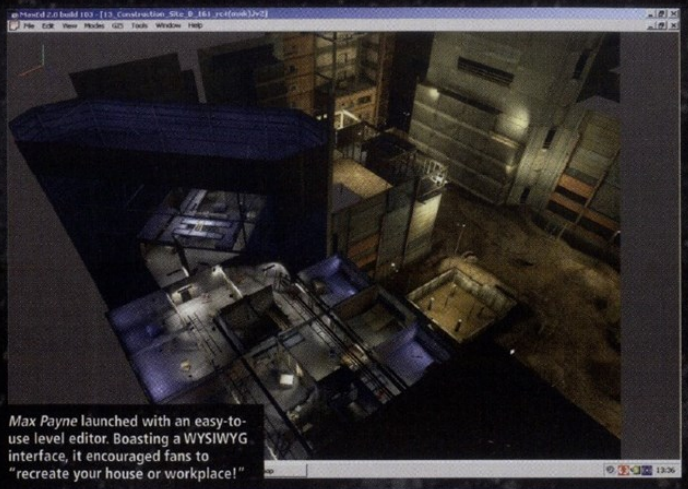
Early concept art alludes to the game's former look, while the menacing photo shoots (left) reflect its later transformation. Discussions were held with a UK studio regarding porting the game to Dreamcast, and a devkit with coveted GD-ROM once inhabited Remedy's offices







While Remedy set about introducing its high-flying particles to early Havok physics, Lake was left to wrestle with the more obvious dilemma: now what? What next for the cop who had destroyed the world of his enemies – just as they'd destroyed his – only to find himself stood atop the rubble? In the darkly titled *The Fall Of Max Payne*, we learned the answer: if life couldn't get any worse for Max, it could certainly



Max Payne launched with an easy-to-use level editor. Boasting a WYSIWYG interface, it encouraged fans to "recreate your house or workplace!"







Payne found a new face in actor Timothy Gibbs, a veteran of US TV who would later, oddly enough, play a detective in Sex And The City. Remedy's method remained the same, using early sketches to dictate heavily Photoshopped acting sessions





get more complicated. Did the introduction of Mona Sax, the femme fatale in a grander, murkier and more open sequel, pose problems for a story that was, at its best, about the isolation and disintegration of just one man?

"I did worry, and I did struggle," Lake admits. "The main reason was Max's narration, his internal monologue. That was a very important tool to tell the story, maybe the most important one. Through it, we get to know what Max thinks and feels. He's not an empty vessel. I did want to switch to Mona [she later became a playable character] – in fact, had there been more time, it would have been nice to add levels where you play as Vinnie, Vlad and Bravura – but it was problematic. In the end, Max frames those sequences with his narration, saying that he doesn't know exactly what happened, or what Mona did, but it must have been something like this. In other words, when you are playing Mona, you are actually experiencing Max's guess of the events."

Boasting an understandably superior lead performance from Timothy Gibbs, a professional actor, the game reviewed well, ported admirably to PS2 and Xbox, and has since helped the series achieve sales of over seven million copies. But not everyone allowed the drama and spectacle to excuse the unwavering action epitomised by Max's slow-motion leaps. This magazine, notably, scored the first game six out of ten.

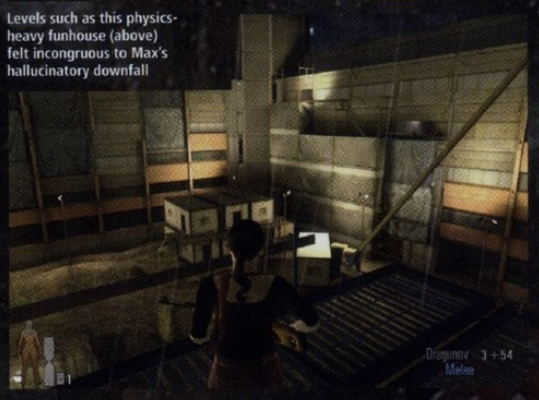
"We're firm believers in focusing on *something*," insists Mäki. "I'm not sure you could do it quite so focused nowadays, as people's expectations have grown, but it was deliberate. Deliver an experience and deliver it well."

"And we've always been very aggressive when cutting stuff out of a game," says Vanhatalo. "We've never been fans of having to backtrack through the level to get the red keycard, for example. That whole 30 seconds thing [a reference to *Halo*'s self-professed recycling of action moments] is often called the core loop – and that was our core loop. A good recent example would be something like *Call Of Duty 4*: you pretty much do the same thing but with a different gun in a different place, but it nails the core loop so perfectly that you never tire of it."

Now, of course, Max Payne has another new face – that of Mark Wahlberg, star of Fox's imminent movie adaptation which, on the outside, stays true to the game's themes, characters, setup and art. After the misfire of Hitman, the third-act collapse of Silent Hill and the wanton awfulness of Uwe Boll's entire canon, the staff at







Levels such as this physics-heavy funhouse (above) felt incongruous to Max's hallucinatory downfall



Remedy circa 2001, an image made public during the game's hidden final level. Note the conspicuous figure on the right (Lake)

Remedy – who found out about the movie via the internet, having sold the option rights back in 2001 – remain open to the possibility of it actually being, well, all right. "It's only natural that we haven't been involved," says Lake. "We're a small developer – we want to concentrate on what we know best. It is nice, though – the feeling that something you've created was interesting enough for people to do their interpretation. Games and movies are very different; some things work and some don't. We're looking forward to seeing it."

While he rightly observes that a trailer, especially nowadays, is no measure of a movie, it must be reassuring to see the more hallucinatory side of *Max Payne* emerging on the big screen, even in the form of CGI demons that yank their prey out of windows. At least this isn't your average crime thriller, even if it does represent another attempt to pass hard-man dialogue through its star's slightly unsuitable vocal chords.

"The advantage for us was that many of these things were seldom seen in games but often seen in movies, so it was fun to tap into that material," says Lake. "We have this saying at the office: 'some call them clichés, we call them classics'. Making a movie's a totally different thing because you've seen those things already, so many times." Let's hope, then, that the makers of Max Payne are enjoying a reversal of that process, using videogame fantasy to break the mould of the pedestrian, PG-rated cop movie. "I'd like to think so, definitely," smiles Lake.

If the worst happens, chances are it will only fuel the demand for what people really want: *Max Payne 3*. Remedy is still hard at work on its remarkable-looking psychological thriller *Alan Wake* – but so long as there's a desire to see Max reload his guns, people will sow rumours. It's something Lake himself wonders about. "It would be nice to know exactly what people love about it, but these things aren't that clear. Something worked well there, and people remember the character. I remember articles at the time talking about *Tomb Raider*, saying that to have this thirdperson approach made many male players feel protective about Lara – there was this extra motivation to keep her alive. It seems that we managed to do something similar."

"I'm quite certain that at some point there'll be another Max Payne. He has a good home with Rockstar and I'm sure they'll do something impressive"

Does a third game have a place among the likes of *Stranglehold* (Vanhatalo: "You could tell they put a lot of love into that game"), *Gears Of War* and *Resident Evil 5*? "I'm quite certain that at some point there'll be another *Max Payne*," says Lake. "He has a good home with Rockstar and I'm sure they'll do something impressive with him when the time is right. We worked with Max for seven years and, to be honest, for a couple of years afterwards that felt like more than enough. He's a gloomy guy to spend your time with. Now, though, there are times when you start to think about what kinds of stories you could do with him. You can't help it."

Another five years on, few have risen to *Max Payne*'s really quite simple challenge: to make a game that doesn't just point its camera at a person, but *looks* at them, creating more than just a player-inhabited shell. Games like *BioShock* are lauded for their storytelling yet continue to swirl around a vacuum, or at best a figment reflected in the words of others. Despite the best efforts of *Heavenly Sword* to fill the void, we're still confronted with releases such as *Fracture*, games whose heroes are so bland that they achieve a kind of negative value. By continuing to create what Lake calls "strong leads", Remedy might well, as its name suggests, retain the cure.



SMASH HITS

When it comes to action, *Max Payne* seems more concerned with the bullets that miss than the ones that hit their targets. It's the collateral damage – the popping bottles, flying paper and tumbling furniture – that seems to define the experience. "Quite a few things needed to mesh to get that result," explains Mäki. "In *Max Payne*, the mayhem evolved over time, starting from a fairly obsessive attention to detail of bullets and bullet casings. For example, we went and shot a genuine MP5 to scan the real texture of ejected 9mm casings, as that gun leaves very distinct markings on the ejected shells. This then evolved into realistic-looking decals, and we already had a really groundbreaking particle system that could be used for flying debris. I think the biggest challenge in technical terms was to be able to render it all efficiently; lots of small objects that can break was fairly taxing for the hardware."

Codeshop

Tracking developments in development

Bring the family

It's autumn, so it must be time for another round of art packages; and for the first time Autodesk's 2009 range includes four game-focused products

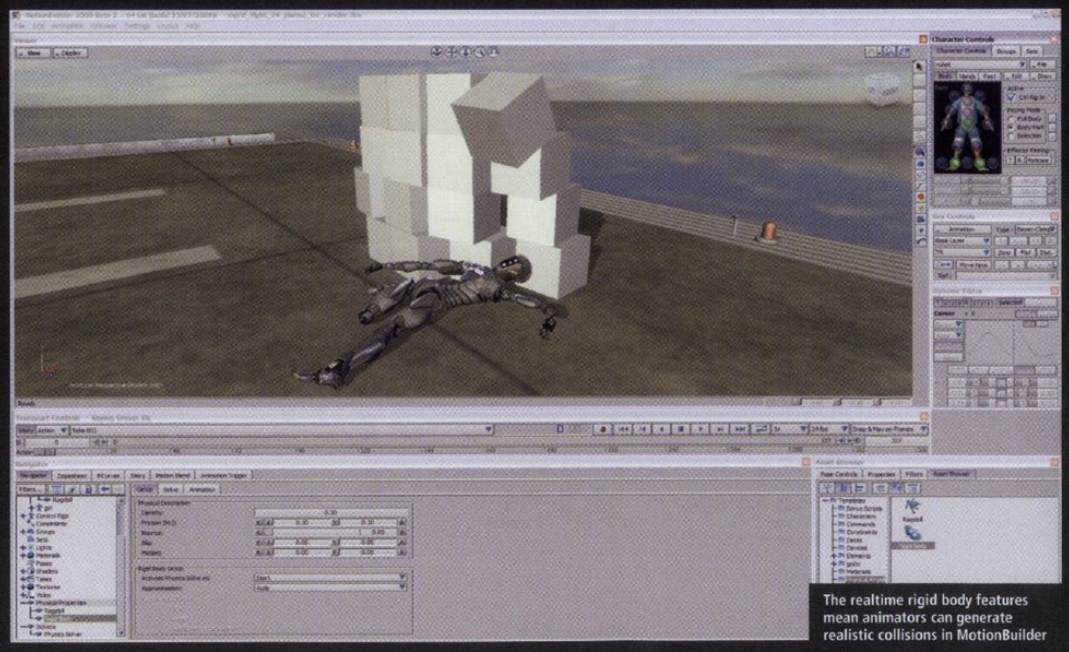


www.autodesk.com

If you wanted an example of how quickly the commercial landscape can change, you'd be hard pushed to find a better one than Autodesk's domination of the 3D modelling, animation and painting tools used by game developers. After all, three short years ago, its only product in the games market was 3DS Max. Granted, it was the market leader – at least in terms of volume – but 36 months and several hundreds of millions of acquisition dollars later, the Media & Entertainment division of the world's largest design software company is in an almost monopolistic position thanks to its ownership of 3DS Max and Maya, not to mention realtime animation package MotionBuilder and 3D sculpting tool Mudbox. Of course, you can buy other packages – Softimage's XSI, Luxology's modo and Pixologic's ZBrush, for instance – but Autodesk's combined firepower, and sales team, is pretty much dominant.

Still, it takes time to get the different development teams moving in sync: for one thing, 3DS Max is developed out of Montreal while the Maya and MotionBuilder teams remain in Toronto, which is where Autodesk's one-time game rival Alias was based. Equally, most recent acquisition Mudbox is split with half its staff in Toronto and an

"Previously we had to try and guess how the 3DS Max guys and the Maya guys were going to handle features"

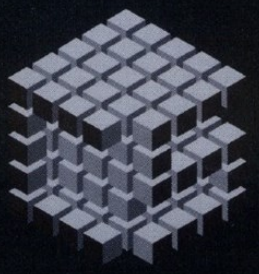


The realtime rigid body features mean animators can generate realistic collisions in MotionBuilder









Mudbox 2009

The first release since Autodesk bought Mudbox maker Skymatter at the end of 2007, Mudbox 2009 is effectively Mudbox 2 with extra Autodesk polish, but much of the code has been rewritten too. "The only things that are the same are some of the staff images and the file open and save system," Cardwell reveals.

Other than this, the main focuses have been performance, texture painting and something Cardwell calls rendering and presentation. "We had some limitations in Mudbox 1. We had a point shading mode, but now you're able to rotate your scenes with proper shadows and HDR lighting," he says.

This part of the release sees an improved user interface and a camera set-up which is more 'Maya-like' than before. There's also a push to squash the gap between an asset's appearance in-tool and in-game. This has been improved by opening up the shader options so developers can use their own shaders.

The biggest additions, however, are the texture painting tools. "There's a whole slew of things that come along with painting tools. There's also a lot of things that people haven't done before in terms of memory management and being able to paint across multiple UV titles," Cardwell explains.

outsourced team (actually the original developers) in eastern Europe.

At least the marketeers are on the case, with each of the packages now sporting a 2009 moniker, although 3DS Max 2009 was released during spring 2008 and has had a summer Creativity Extension release. The others have followed the more traditional post-SIGGRAPH autumn rollout.

Yet, behind the scenes, the interoperability between all four is slowly being ramped up. It doesn't always get the headlines, but for artists, animators and the technical directors who increasingly make the buying decisions in the big development houses, these relatively minor improvements can have a large effect when spread over the 24-plus months that a 50-strong art team will be committed to a major release.

For example, MotionBuilder 2009 now works better with both 3DS Max's Biped or Maya's Full Body Inverse Kinematics rig, while it can also seamlessly handle normal maps created in Maya, 3DS Max or Mudbox; the slight inconsistencies in the ways 3DS Max and Maya handle normal maps having been a notorious issue in the past.

Indeed, **Dave Cardwell**, one of the creators of Mudbox, points to such interoperability as being one of the advantages of joining Autodesk. "Previously we had to try and guess how the 3DS Max guys and the Maya guys were going to handle features, and then write our code accordingly," he says. "Now we get to see their roadmaps, which makes everything much easier for us and for Mudbox users too."



MotionBuilder 2009

In recent years, MotionBuilder hasn't had the same sort of high profile as modelling packages such as 3DS Max and Maya, but the 2009 release sits well within the new Autodesk family. Indeed, as a realtime animation tool, MotionBuilder can also be licensed by game companies in the shape of its animation engine HumanIK, something that Ubisoft used in *Assassin's Creed* and EA has used for many of its sports titles.



The addition of a new ragdoll solver enables animators to simulate complex interactions between a character and its environment that would otherwise be hugely time consuming

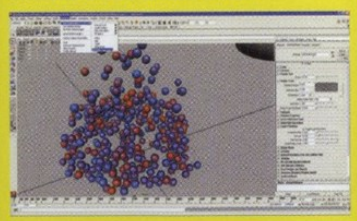
In terms of new features, however, the focus is on improving the quality of character animation, script-based customisation and better visualisation. The former saw the introduction of a rigid body system, which enables animators to set up physically modelled scenes within MotionBuilder between characters and objects using a full collision system. This is combined with a new ragdoll solver, which can be applied to the control rig to enable realistic motions to be created more quickly than would be possible using keyframes or motion capture. Further control is provided in terms of a Python script editor, which offers syntax checking and command highlighting, as well as flexible interface options. Finally, support is extended for 64bit Windows Vista, also enabling use of up to128GB of RAM when using Windows XP 64, making it easier to handle larger and more complex scenes and improving all-round performance.



Maya 2009

Ten years since the original art package called Maya was released, Maya 2009 isn't a huge release feature-wise but there are some interesting new additions. One is the nParticle system, which slots into the Maya Nucleus framework. This means anything created using nParticles should also work seamlessly with the original nCloth module, making it possible to combine fluids within containers to create interactive pressurised objects, for example.

Another new component is the animation layering system, which has been modified from realtime animation package MotionBuilder. It allows you to create non-destructive animation work in a similar way to working with layers in Photoshop. These layers, which can be brought in from existing animation libraries or mocap sessions, can be blended, merged, grouped and reordered, as well as added to preceding layers. Maya 2009 also adds official support to the MEL scripts released in the previous set of free bonus tools, which enable the preservation of UVs, and a new unwrapping tool has been added to the UV texture editor.





Maya's UV unwrapping tools have been improved with the addition of an interactive pelt system

Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

■ **NAME:** EA Bright Light

■ **DATE FOUNDED:** 2007 (previously EA UK)

■ **NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES:** 150

■ **KEY STAFF:** Harvey Elliott (studio GM), Will Byles (creative director), Jonathan Bunney and Rob O'Farrell (executive producers)



■ **URLS:** www.ea.com, jobs.ea.com

■ **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY**
Theme Park, Syndicate, Populous, Dungeon Keeper, Harry Potter franchise



Zubo **is an adventure game that sees you using the DS microphone and touchscreen to solve puzzles with the cylinder-headed Zubos, before engaging in rhythm-based battles against their enemies, the Zombos, tapping with the stylus at the right time to attack**

bright light on studio



■ **LOCATION:**
Guildford, Surrey, UK

■ **CURRENT PROJECTS:**
Harry Potter And The Half-Blood Prince, Zubo, Monopoly, Hasbro Family Game Night

■ **ABOUT THE STUDIO**

"Rebranded in 2007, EA Bright Light is the leading studio within EA's Casual Entertainment label. Formerly known as EA's UK Studio, EA Bright Light has been the creative force behind some of the most recognisable videogames within the industry. Its *Harry Potter* franchise is the most successful movie-game series of all time, and its deep heritage through the acquisition of Bullfrog Productions in 1995 is hard to ignore. Games such as *Theme Park*, *Syndicate*, *Populous* and *Dungeon Keeper* are all names that are familiar to many in the industry today.

"In 2007 EA divided its business into four strategic labels, EA Games, EA Sports, The Sims and EA Casual Entertainment. Under its new general manager, Harvey Elliott, the UK studio has a new name, a new home and a renewed focus on family and young audiences. Elliott has set the objective to make EA Bright Light the world's leading character action studio focusing on family and young audiences. The first title to be released under the EA Bright Light banner is *Zubo*, a wholly original new IP which was developed by the team in Guildford and, unusually, designed as a DS exclusive for boys and girls aged seven and above."



EA Bright Light's focus on family-friendly entertainment is exemplified by the likes of *Hasbro Family Game Night*, which teams host Mr Potato Head with classic boardgames such as Connect Four and Battleship



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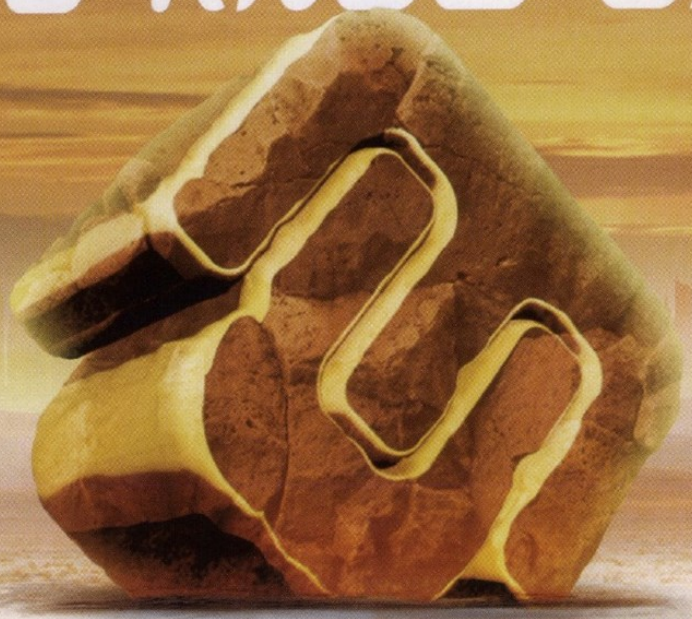
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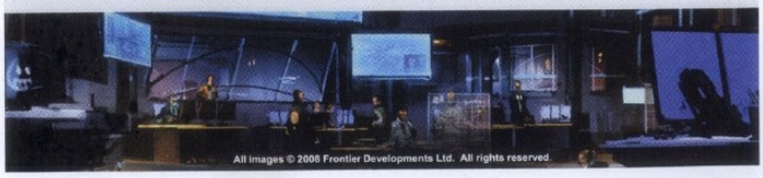
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University profile

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■ **INSTITUTION:**
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■ **NUMBER OF STUDENTS:** 19,500

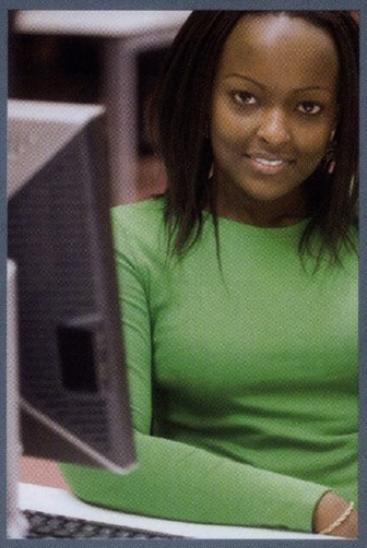
■ **URL:** www.uws.ac.uk/computing

■ **CONTACT:** 0800 027 1000 (uni-direct@uws.ac.uk)



■ **KEY STAFF**
Professor Thomas Connolly (programme leader for computer games technology); John Sutherland (senior lecturer, programme leader for computer games development)

■ **KEY ALUMNI**
Robert McDowell (senior programmer, Real Time Worlds), David Uberti (Sony Computer Entertainment – Technology Group, London), Lawrence Kerr (Rockstar North), Alex McFarlane, Paul Derrick, Barry Wood, John Morrison and Michael Gormley (various programming positions, Blitz Games Limited), Richard Rowan (Codeplay), Shaun Milne (TPLD), Gordon McLean and Callum Hay (Cohort)





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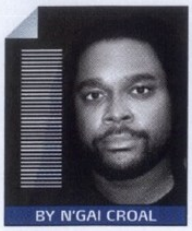
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BY N'GAI CROAL

PLAYING IN THE DARK ...because people refuse to see

The finish line

Two columns ago, I wrote about my reluctance to even start playing certain games. The flipside of that is completing a game once I've fired it up. Many factors play into this, but assuming that the game in question passes my quality threshold, how it handles difficulty is a fairly accurate indicator of whether or not I'll ultimately finish it. (Yes, I might be more motivated to finish what I start if I actually had to buy most of my own games – don't cry for me, Hyrule – but that's another topic for another column.)

You might say: "If you're having a hard time on medium, why not just drop down to easy?" The problem is that I don't trust most developers when it comes to the dark arts of game balance. In my ten years covering videogames, I've rarely heard developers spend much time discussing the effort that's gone into creating a compelling easy setting. I'm more apt to hear them talk about the challenges that they've crafted at the other end of the spectrum: expert, veteran, legendary, hardcore, survivor, nightmare.

> "What sense does it make to continue to design games in such a way that many people who buy them can't, won't or don't finish them?"

That's somewhat understandable: developers themselves have historically been hardcore gamers, as have their most avid and vocal fans. But even as the demographics of gamers continue to broaden, as publishers beat their chests about misleading talking points like 'videogames are bigger than Hollywood box-office', too many developers still believe that the Platonic ideal of 'gamer' is the hardcore gamer of old; according this philosophy, the skill level of all gamers is some portion of that ideal gamer. But this philosophy isn't nuanced enough to properly accommodate the various strata of gamers that now exist. (Boston Phoenix reviewer Mitch Krpata, on his blog Insult Swordfighting, has compiled an excellent series of posts under the title A New Taxonomy of Gamers that devises several new ways to label gamers that go beyond 'casual' and 'core'; it's definitely worth Googling.)

I've written before in this space about the need for developers to rethink challenge, progression and difficulty in videogames. But the point that I'd like to focus on now is this: what sense does it make to continue to design games in such a way that many people who buy them can't, won't or don't finish them? Or, put another way, how many more games would be sold if people knew without a shadow of a doubt that they'd be capable of finishing every game they started?

That's what I liked most about the Vita-Chamber save system in *BioShock* which revived players without restoring the health of the enemies. It cued me to understand that no matter how challenging the game got on medium – no matter how the difficulty might spike along the way – I'd be able to complete it before dedication devolved into drudgery. In fact, as I play review code for the PS3 version, the gently-encouraging-without-being-an-unfair-cakewalk Vita-Chambers are motivating me to replay the game – this time as a rescuer rather than a harvester of the Little Sisters – on a harder difficulty setting. Yet several gamers criticised the Vita-Chambers for making the game too easy to complete; a subsequent patch gave them the option to turn off the Vita-Chambers for a stricter challenge. And while I'm selfishly focused on the easy end of the difficulty curve, I agree with those gamers that we should all have more power to tailor each title to the specific type of challenge that each of us is seeking, whether that's harder or easier.

Too many games ask us to choose a difficulty setting before we've experienced a single second of gameplay. That doesn't make much sense considering that the first levels of a game teach us how it should be played. Some, like *Call Of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, use an initial training mission to determine a recommended difficulty setting, while others, like *God Of War*, ask us if we want to switch to an easier setting after repeated deaths at the same point in the game. Those are both improvements, but there's still plenty of room for developers to get better.

Why not use Xbox 360 Achievement and/or PlayStation 3 Trophy data from other titles that a gamer has played in the same genre to better determine an initial difficulty setting? Why not let us change the difficulty setting between dying and resuming play? (*Tomb Raider: Underworld* is doing this, with granular user-adjustable settings for player health, enemy health and more.) Why not have a No Fail/Travelling/God Mode – not locked off, not as a cheat code, but as an option that users can select from the main menu – for story-based games and other non-puzzle-based games so that even players of little ability can finish the game. You know, the game we spent a chunk of cash to buy. Some of us want to be entertained, some engaged, some challenged and some punished, but we all want to complete the game in a satisfying manner. So help us help you help us to do so.

N'Gai Croal writes about technology for Newsweek. His blog can be found at blog.newsweek.com/blogs/levelup



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Tom Williams: Technical Director - Blackrock Studio

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Manuele Bonanno: MSc Graduate 2008

For more quotes from ex-students, examples of student work and syllabus information please visit: www.mscdegrees.com

Goldsmiths, University of London
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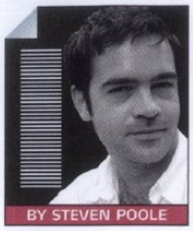
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BY STEVEN POOLE

TRIGGER HAPPY Shoot first, ask questions later

Beyond the pad

Gamers have long had it too easy. I for one applaud Quantic Dream's approach to cybernetics, as revealed in **Edge** 193's preview of *Heavy Rain*. If you want to hide, the system dictates that you keep a random, awkward combination of buttons held down. The discomfort you feel in your fingers mirrors the discomfort of your character, folded up into an airing cupboard. And so you relate to your character because you share her pain. This is an excellent idea, and it only remains for other courageous developers to take the next logical steps. I am working on a design document for an interactive-storytelling extravaganza, provisionally entitled Chubby Drizzle, which will be packaged with a £150 peripheral that you attach to the ceiling above your sofa and connect to a nearby tap. The game will then squirt cold water down on you while you are playing, so you feel that you really have entered a world where it is always raining.

> "Maybe if your character dies in a shooter, the console would pepper you with a hail of rubber bullets rather than real ones"

This is only the beginning, of course. Perhaps a razor-sharp spring-loaded katana peripheral could slice your hand off at the wrist when you lose a bout in *Soul Calibur IV*. Developers would naturally want to avoid the lawsuits that would arise if they actually killed too many players, of course. Maybe if your character dies in a shooter, the console would pepper you with a hail of rubber bullets rather than real ones.

The idea is not new. Back in 2001, two students at Cologne's Academy of Media Arts built the original PainStation, a tabletop *Pong* clone that gave the players electric shocks or whipped their hands with wire; a second version also used blinding flashes of light to disorient players. The point of this, though, was not to immerse the players better in some hyper-realistic digital universe: quite the opposite. "One major aspect of pain in the game is to distract the players from the actual gameplay," they explained.

Indeed, discomfort as often alienates the player – as the struggle with the hunk of moulded plastic in her hands wrenches her attention out of the virtual space – as it increases her empathy with her gameworld avatar. What is difficult is to decide when this is going to be the case, and when by contrast it can be a useful technique. Mention the absolutely stunning 'corridor scene' to those who have completed *MGS4* and they will nod sagely – it's the best excuse for button-mashing since *Track & Field*.

But the last act of *MGS4* also makes surprising use of Quick Time Events, which seems to be addressing a related cybernetic problem: how do you let the player do something really cool if it's basically going to be a one-off, so that there's no point incorporating it into the already massively complicated control scheme? Kojima turns it into a test of timing. This actually works well in the particular context of martial arts, when a practitioner's trained body has various 'automatic' moves programmed in to the neuromuscular system, and their timing is critically important.

On the other hand, it is possible that the increasing fashion for QTEs in high-concept games is born of an understanding among developers that our current videogame control systems are increasingly impotent when called upon to support new artistic directions. Some of the most progressive designers are attempting to move away from a paradigm in which the player combines discrete simple physical actions – hit, shoot, duck – that can be permanently assigned to separate buttons. But what would a controller for a richer, more analogue form of virtual life look like? Motion sensing as in the Wii Remote or PS3's Sixaxis is not the answer to this problem – after all, I don't actually want to have to crouch awkwardly on my living room floor so that my character can crouch awkwardly under the virtual stairs.

A QTE does have the strong advantage of what I have before termed 'amplification of input' – the satisfaction that comes from the contrast between the ease of a button press and the complexity of an in-game action – but since QTEs are dependent on context – pressing the triangle button does a completely different thing in a different point of the game – the sense of predictable control, of the player having her own repertoire of action, is lost. Essentially you end up choosing actions from a different pre-set menu every time. It's a retrograde step for cybernetic immersivity.

In the end, the absurdity of having to press an uncomfortable sequence of buttons in order to make your character hide in *Heavy Rain* can be seen as a special instance of the general problem now facing the most visionary designers. You want to allow the player to do new things, but how will she do them? Maybe the joypad is now exhausted. If so, what will replace it?

Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life Of Videogames. Visit him online at stevenpoole.net





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BY RANDY SMITH

HI, I'M RANDY Videogame design, etc

The big questions

On one extreme you've got 'art': Van Gogh's Starry Night, Michelangelo's David, slabs of rusted metal elegantly posed outside an office building, a buck-naked performer howling and urinating while attempting to play a xylophone with her feet. You know, art. On the other extreme you've got 'product': individually packaged microwavable pancakes, Pokémon plush dolls, sunglasses for pets. Useless stuff that adds a breathtakingly small amount of value to our lives. The space between the extremes is densely inhabited. Die Hard 4.0, though clearly pleased by its own degeneracy, was not a completely artless film. Harry Potter approaches highly competent children's literature, but that doesn't make it any less of a product. So what might be a summary of their distinctions? Is it that art is all about expression whereas product is all about profit?

> "I would certainly prefer that more people connect to my work than fewer, provided I don't have to compromise the core to achieve that"

If I believed in disclaimers, here's one that might have kicked off my column a year ago: games usually represent a balance between art and product, and there's nothing wrong with that. I write about the ways that games are artistic and can improve their artistry, but I don't think we should purge everything that's not art from the entire medium. I doubt anyone dreams of a future in which all games are difficult works which trouble the layman, and taxpayers bemoan what percentage of their pay funds Xbox 360s for the Guggenheim. Some games provide basic creature comforts, not unlike nachos and queso or your 65th viewing of The Big Lebowski, and God bless them for it. *Mario Kart* doesn't do a whole lot to expand my horizons, but I put a lot of time into it and feel gratified with what it gives back.

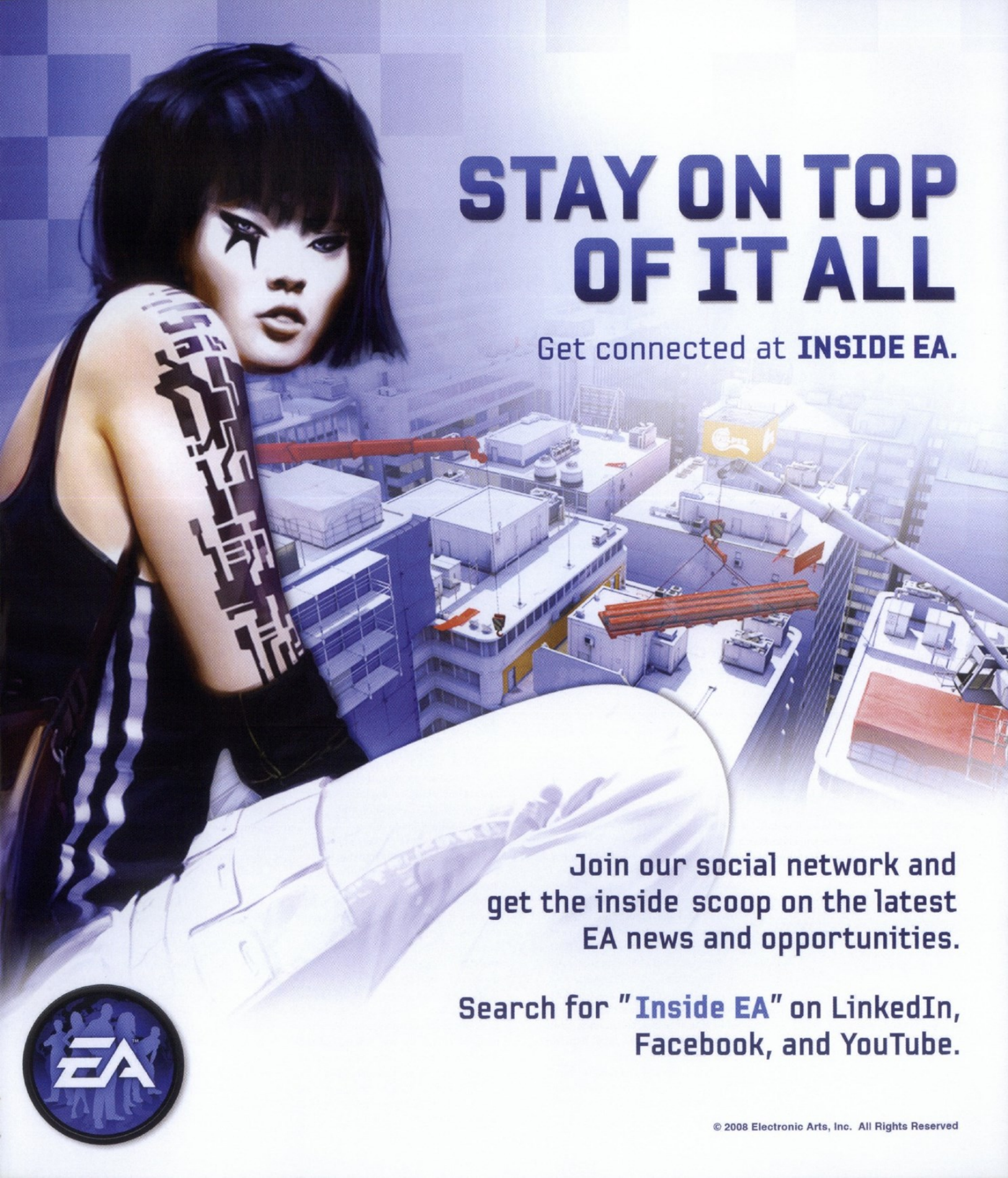
A more important question might be to ask how much of the average videogame is art and how much is product? What would be your ideal mixture between the two? Maybe the latter is a trick question, because personally I believe that it's not mandatory that they compromise. The game that ruthlessly targets the broadest appeal at all costs will wind up diluting itself to the lowest common denominator and becoming creatively bland. The game that seeks to be a vibrant personal expression at the cost of all approachability will attract the narrowest audience. But even though the balancing act is a real challenge, the motivations to make art and product can reinforce each other. From an artistic point of view, I would certainly prefer that more people connect to my work than fewer, provided I don't have to compromise the core to achieve that. Even under the cruel heel of the profit motive, the reality of most high-profile games, the most successful product is not just the one that reaches the largest number of people but the one that appeals to them the most. So is art a great commodity? Look at the highest-grossing films of all time and ask how much their artistry helped them achieve that standing: Titanic, two Lords Of The Rings, two Pirates Of The Caribbean, The Dark Knight, three Harry Potters, The Phantom Menace, Shrek 2 and Jurassic Park... art or product?

If I'm ambivalent about art vs product, it's because I believe that distinction too easily misses the point. The thing that impresses me most about Harmonix is not that they had the chops to make *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band* into ridiculously successful products, but that they answer to a higher calling. As Greg LoPiccolo explained in my interview with him in last month's **Edge**, their company mission statement is to bring the joy of performing music to people who haven't learned a conventional instrument. That's a lofty goal that our medium is positioned to deliver on in a unique way, and it's not the only one. We live in a world where the pivotal topics that will determine the future of our species, such as climate change, the economy, overpopulation and genetic engineering, are dictated by massive interconnected systems whose long-term behaviours are counter-intuitive to the human brain. Would more people take the inevitability and implications of global warming seriously if they had grown up with *SimEarth* and had a chance to learn about large systems through play and exploration? What else can games do? What can't they do?

I'm like you. I get off on pure, unadulterated entertainment. But the thing I've noticed is that the games, movies, books and songs that stick with me the most are the ones that capture an indescribable nuance of my inner self, or introduced me to an idea that I now hold sacred, or motivated me to be the best person I can be. And that this appreciation has little direct correlation with whether they are a tiny niche no one else seems to appreciate or a cash cow global phenomenon. We should be proud that, far from being just a diversion, we are part of a medium that is evolving its unique ability to approach these lofty goals in a way that's never been done before. That there is a direct connection between blowing up asteroids with vector graphics and improving people's lives and changing the world.

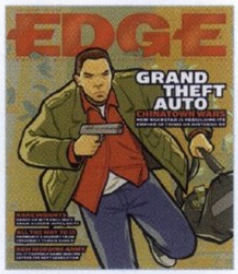
Randy Smith is a lead game designer at EA's LA studio. His current project is a collaboration with Steven Spielberg





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inbox



Issue 194

ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum
forum.edge-online.co.uk

Topic: King of the geeks

Videogaming is sort of geeky already. Sometimes, however, an extra layer of nerdliness can be added. When have you let science/hardcore gaming/just being a loser get the better of you?
mr_shoe_uk

I set one of the combination padlocks at my work to 1337 to help me remember it easier. I still feel ashamed about that.
ScotsWahey

I always prefer 8008135.
LesterUnlimited

Constantly. Posting on a games forum after 12 while wearing an xkcd T-shirt in bed is fairly bad form.
Shinji

I have some of those graffiti faceplates from the 360 launch event. And I have a spare 360, in case one RRoDs.
ZMM

That's just common sense though.
Skerret

I have just read that, again, there are crossplatform games being released with exclusive downloadable content for the Xbox 360 – eg, *Fallout 3* and *Tomb Raider: Underworld*.

Whilst there have always been exclusives for one platform or another or having one platform as the 'lead' for a game release, the trend in having exclusive downloadable content for crossplatform titles is not one I am at ease with.

It used to be that if you had an Xbox you knew there'd be no *GTA*, or if you had a PS2 you'd miss out on *Halo* or maybe wait longer for a title, but that was expected and accepted. However, crossplatform games were always the 'safe' middle ground and the same for everyone.

With the exclusive content for these 'safe' games it feels, to me, like one section of the public is effectively being 'done' if they buy the same title but for the 'wrong' platform. They will be forking out the same amount of money but not actually getting the same overall package. I feel there is a distinct difference between not having a game at all and paying the same money for less.

The tactic of changing this 'safe' middle ground, from a consumer's perspective, will either force people to invest in more hardware to be assured of having access to the version of a game which offers the most bang for their buck, or miss out.

Maybe I'm just too long in the tooth, but it makes me uneasy that I may not be able to simply go into a shop and be assured of getting the same game content as the chap in front of me in the queue, if I happen to pick up the PS3 case off the shelf and he has the 360 version.
Stephen Nicol

It's an issue that will always be around while platform holders are prepared to hand over cash for exclusive episodic content. That doesn't make it more digestible, of course. We're more concerned about DLC that only a short time ago would've been on the game disc in the first place.

With the exclusive content for these 'safe' games it feels like one section of the public is effectively being 'done' if they buy the title for the wrong platform

As the videogame medium evolves, the perception of its cultural meaning and value changes. It could seem odd to state an optimistic view in the acceptance of the videogame's cultural significance in these days of *GTA* bashing and vaporous debates on videogame-induced violence. Nevertheless, the influence of videogame culture is growing, and not only with the old stereotypical nerdy signature. In the September 13 issue of The Economist, *BioShock* is cited in an article from the Business section. But not regarding its publisher or its developer: *BioShock*'s story and conceptual background is used as an analogy. In a form of cultural flattery, citing a source is a two-way enriching act – the source is recognised as noble, brilliant and worthy. As the medium treads the way toward cultural maturity, more and more games will gain this privilege. And as long as games like *BioShock* are being created, that would be easier and more common.
Marco Gandolfi



Letter of the month wins a DS Lite

Progress indeed. You have to hope that games with less overt themes can also receive such attention in the future. Let's see a good writer riff on *Super Mario Galaxy*, for example.

I was reading Mark Whitfield's letter [**E193**] and felt compelled to write in. A few years ago I would have happily criticised the games industry with comparisons to other media, but as my observations on the gaming industry have matured I have come to realise that such comparisons are just unfounded.

You could suggest that games do not have the freedom to be fully expressive in all themes that film and written media have. To cherry-pick an example, the subject of rape (yes, a rather dire example, but bear with me) has been the subject of films, television and books more than once – and other than some minor backlash they are often praised for attempting to approach a contemporary issue.

But can you imagine what would happen if a game tried to approach the issue? Needless to say the tabloids would sell a fair few more copies than usual. Perhaps there's a reason for this? Would allowing a player in *Fable II* (if they are evil) to rape women be approaching the issue in the right way?

Is there a correct way to implement the theme in an interactive medium?

Perhaps games are an unsuitable media format to discuss some of the heavy subjects that some people would like. After reading Raph Koster's Theory Of Fun I have come to believe this. He suggests that all games (not just digital) are simply a method of learning in a safe environment.

The problem is that our games still teach us old lessons that are no longer relevant. We no longer need to hunt, avoid predators or organise skirmishes against our rival tribes. So I say that the games industry's job is not at all like that of other media. It does not need to approach topics for discussion – it needs to teach us how to avoid today's problems. Returning back to the rape analogy, perhaps a game to teach people the skills to avoid that most horrid of situations could be devised?

Games need to mature, but I am worried they may move in a direction that could stifle their potential, and devolve them into no more than an extension of film.

Tom Phillips

Isn't that something of a literal reading of Koster's theories? Whatever the case, we're nervous about spelling out precisely what games are and are not capable of addressing from a cultural perspective – certainly at this point in their evolution.

I am writing in response to the 'Is the game up?' industry article [E193], in particular the latter part of the article involving the lack of fresh talent in the UK.

The writer points out a distinct lack of industry interest from young people, which I am inclined to agree with, myself finding IT painfully boring at school. However, while it is important for the government and teachers to make it seem more attractive, it is also important for the games industry itself to address these issues.

I am a recent graduate after studying animation at Staffordshire University. As part of my course I completed a module involving contacting industry professionals, not to beg for jobs but to gain a view of what the industry is like, possibly resulting in some unpaid work experience. After sending copious amounts of emails, letters, showreels and business cards all across the industry, I received just one response! EA Games invited me to look around their studios, then I was told their university relations programme was on hold and I wouldn't be able to visit.

Companies complain that there is no fresh talent in the UK, but very few seem to be interested in helping develop the next generation of the industry

Compare this to some Australian and Canadian games developers I contacted, who all replied, or the people I emailed from film-based animation studios, who all replied, some of whom even visited my university.

My argument is that the industry needs to become more open and welcoming to new blood. It is easy for them to sit back and complain that there is no fresh talent in the UK, but very few companies seem to be interested in helping the education system to develop the next generation of the games industry.

Ben Lathwell

Anyone working in the UK game industry care to respond? In the meantime, Ben, a shiny new Nintendo DS console should help while away the time waiting for replies.



Stephen Nicol isn't happy that *Tomb Raider: Underworld* will be getting two doses of DLC – both announced before the game's release – but only if you happen to own the game in Xbox 360 form

F

Topic: Shame on you

Okay, let's hear it. Tell us the worst games you've purchased.
Nogginz

I should have known better but *Big Beach Sports* for the Wii. It was only £10 and I thought I could get some enjoyment playing against younger relatives. Unfortunately I would have been done for child abuse if I had let them play it.
Sidesalad

***Pitfall 2*, Spectrum. The thought of buying that still pisses me off 20 years later.**
mrsmr2

I have *Lair* AND *Spider-Man 3*.
pandabears

***Sonic* on 360 holds a special place in my heart.**
M D B

***Home Alone 2* on the NES. I finished it too.**
Shinji

***Panzer Commander* for the PC. Chose training course and Tiger tank. Takes ten minutes of driving at top speed to get along the road to the target range. It breaks down before I get there. Unbelievable.**
Matt 82

***Turok 2*, easily.**
Dan Dare

Topic: Retro chic

Over the last couple of years, I've noticed that the cool kids have been sporting retro videogame-related clothing, bags, jewellery, whatever.
Diluted Dante

Cool kids ride their bikes to work, and wear tight shirts that show off their biceps. They go to clubs and listen to funky-house while sipping on Fiji Water and doing coke off their friends thigh. They do NOT wear videogame-related clothing.
Google

I've got a Master Chief T-shirt, does that count?
Speedhaak

I'd say that fails both retro and especially chic.
ubermod



Dennis Ewald has notched up 100 'kills', reaching the ton mark with *Blazing Angels*. What we want now, of course, is to hear from those who've beaten his completions record

As a kid, I spent a lot of time building plastic model planes. WWII planes were my clear favourites. Naturally, I imagined being a pilot and made embarrassing "vroooooooomm" noises while playing with my own little Air Force.

Later on, a second hobby started consuming more and more of my time: playing videogames. The two hobbies came together in the NES days, when I started counting beaten games. In my mind, I compared beating a game with getting a confirmed kill as a WWII pilot. And because that wasn't the easiest thing in the world, I decided to be strict when it came to counting a game as beaten: no cheat codes or cheat devices, and only the highest difficulty setting counts. Which, once in a while, led to frustration: 'Congratulations –

Continued

now try super extra hard extreme mode'. But finally seeing the endings of tough nuts like the first *Mega Man* or *Contra III* was satisfying enough.

I've never been a PC gamer and I can't stand realistic flight sims (I already have a job, thank you very much), so the previous generation of consoles finally provided games that could make my fantasy of being a WWII ace come 'true'. Games like *Secret Weapons Over Normandy* or *Heroes Of The Pacific* will never be remembered as classics, but I loved them. And both could be added to my list of beaten games after some effort.

Now, I've reached a milestone of some sorts... I've beaten game number 100. Despite chronic money shortages during my years as a student, women, booze and other distractions that kept me from achieving this a lot earlier, I finally feel like an ace now. And guess what, number 100 on my list of confirmed kills was the PS3 version of *Blazing Angels: Squadrons Of WWII*.

Next challenge: beat more games than 352. Because that's the amount of kills WWII ace of aces Erich Hartmann ended up with. This might take a while. Better stop smoking.

Dennis Ewald

I have found the controversy swirling around *Spore* to be an example of the attitude that the gaming community needs to avoid if it wants to be seen as suitable for all. First, to put my view in perspective, yes, the DRM issues are draconian, and yes, the finished article isn't what I thought it would be either. But the sneering by both communities and magazines needs to be toned down.

People hold up *BioShock* as a revolutionary game. Was it? Really? I played it six months ago, after the hype, and it was at best a mediocre shooter with some magic added on – that is the reality of the game mechanics. However, what made that game special was the atmosphere. The idea was original, ten out of ten, but the gameplay was nothing special. Exactly the same thing can be said about *Spore*. No other game has taken you from single-cell organism to galactic empire. No game has given you so much creativity in creating UGC for a mainstream game that isn't an MMORPG. So a game with that much scope won't be able to get all aspects right. Yesterday, when I was playing it, somebody had made all the air vehicles look like biker scouts from Star Wars. Someone else has created the Flood from *Halo*. All very clever and very creative, and it means there is a sense of wonder when flying around the universe – and that's the '*BioShock* moment' that makes you look past its flaws. Putting it simply, you have no idea what you are going to encounter at any stage, and that's what makes exploration fun. I have never got that in any other space game because the content is predictable.

The argument about innovation I think is also a distraction. Should every game be breaking boundaries? Or should we remember what the word 'game' implies – y'know, fun. Boundaries being broken in cinema or art or theatre are rarely, if ever, associated with a big hit, so to be critical of a computer game for playing it safe (and how safe *Spore* is is debatable) is unfair. When you look at the recent tens **Edge** has passed out it wasn't for brand-new concepts, just excellent, polished games – *GTAIV* and *Halo 3* being classic examples.

However, *GTAIV*, *BioShock* and *Halo 3* don't increase gaming's appeal to a wider audience, which is what the Wii, *Guitar Hero* and *The Sims* have done. Hardcore gamers seem to want to look down at *Buzz!* but there's room enough in the industry to cater for both markets. For a similar model, look at the cult indie film market and then the Hollywood blockbusters.

Back to *Spore*'s specifics. A common grumble is the desire that certain add-ons equal specific stat-tweaking. If the animal parts all led to specific upgrades then you'd have less variety as everyone makes the fastest creature using the same eight legs, but because many things are cosmetic it allows huge diversity and flexibility. I have a two-year-old son and he loves 'making monsters' with daddy, so we have our first game in common. It shows how well designed and intuitive the Creature Creator really is, and that's something that no 'hardcore' game could do.

The game has it flaws and I'm not fighting for it to be considered some perfect ten masterpiece, but instead, rather than people condemning it for not fitting the criteria of what they hoped it would be, maybe we should just enjoy what we got.

Jem Duducu

But is Creature Creator really a game? Regardless, put it against *LBP*, where play and creation coexist as in no other game, and ultimately Maxis's achievements lose a little lustre.



***Spore* may have the ability to bring families together, as Jem Duducu has discovered, but it found it hard to reconcile its ambitions with the reality that it was a collection of tools, albeit fun ones**

Topic: Game manuals

When did they become utter rubbish? Obviously, back when everyone had Spectrums and C64s, it was simple. You had either a tiny game with equally tiny instructions printed on the inlay, or if it was more complex or in a bigger box you got a proper manual which told you everything about how to play the game. You even had the time it'd take to load to read it too, but there was rarely anything missing. But it's only since getting into console gaming in a big way that I've realised that manuals have gone down the pan. I remember how pissed off I got with *Madden 06* and *07*. The manual simply didn't explain anything. Yes, I know how American football's played, so no problem there, but the complicated franchise modes got one paragraph in the manual, which just blah-ed on about 'leading your franchise to GLORY!' and didn't actually explain how any of the functions worked. There are a lot of games in my burgeoning 360 collection in which I've only found out about a function or a technique by reading FAQs or fan sites later.
Elmlea

Manuals are less important in these days of tutorials. I'm struggling to think of a game I've bought in years that doesn't have some kind of tutorial level, whether it exists in its own right (eg *Guitar Hero*) or is integrated in to the early parts of the game proper (eg *GTAIV*). Back in the day (yo), you needed a manual to tell you what the jump button was (it was C), because once you started the game you were on your own.
Unlikely

I haven't read a manual since I needed to find out how to quit a guild in *World Of WarCraft*. And it didn't tell me either. Manuals were fun when they came packaged with interesting anti-piracy things like *Jet Set Willy*'s colour-coded table (pre-colour photocopier days).
Kow

Good luck playing *Falcon 4.0* without referring to the manual.
Unlikely

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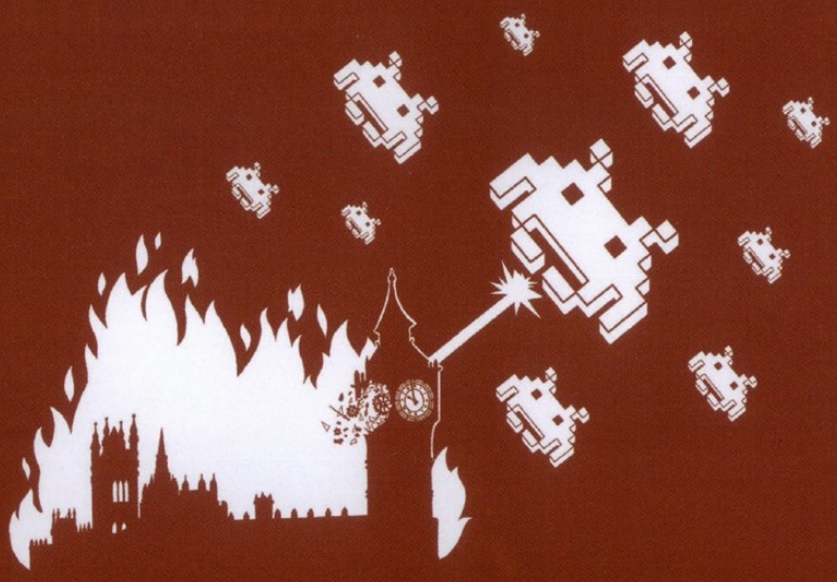


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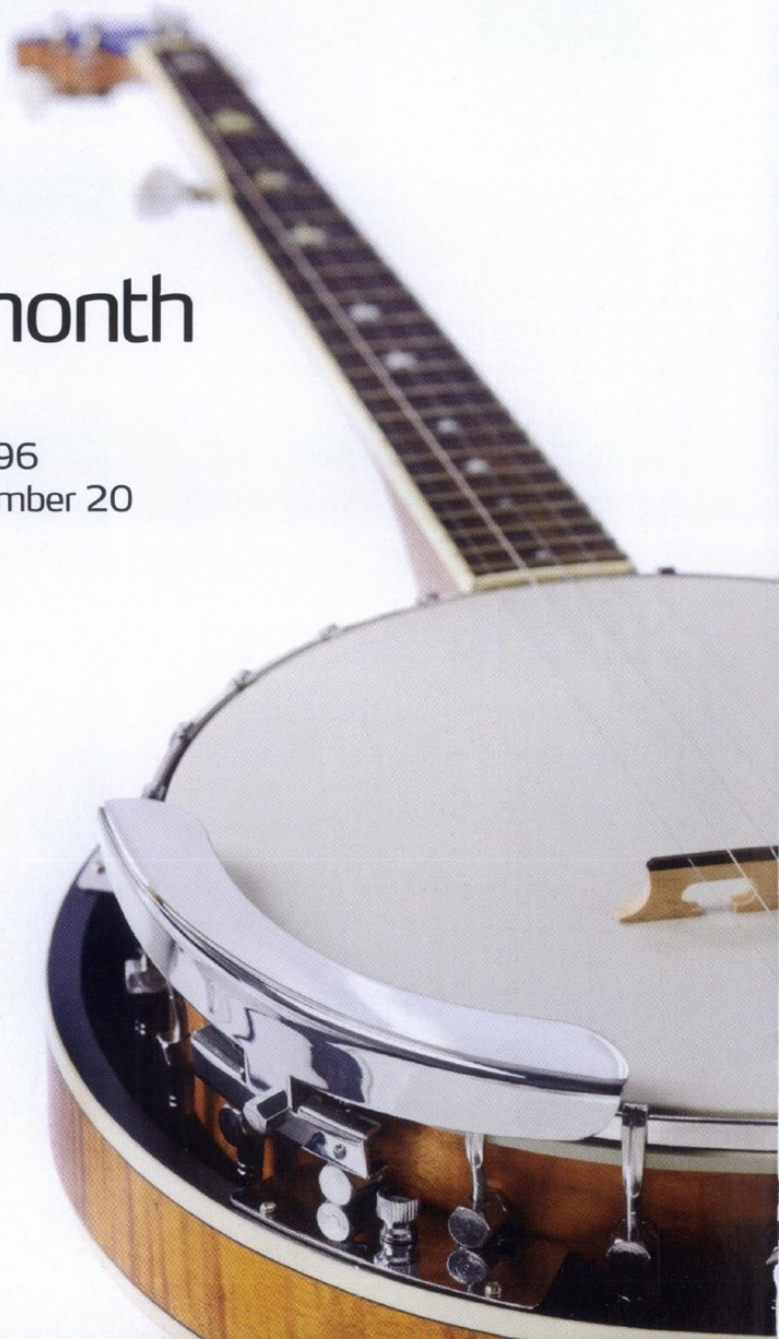


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